Music-Text Relationship in Major Anti-War Masterworks by British Composers

*War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten and *Dona Nobis Pacem*, two of the greatest choral-orchestral masterworks of the twentieth century, will be discussed in terms of the relationship between music and text. The focus of the paper discerns how specifically the composers set the music in order to augment or color the text, which is anti-war in nature, making it deeply meaningful and moving for the listener.

Dr. William M. Skoog

Elizabeth Daughdrill Endowed Fine Arts Chair, Department of Music
Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee

Department of Music
Rhodes College
2000 North Parkway
Memphis, TN 38112

8168 Windersville Dr.
Bartlett, TN 38133

skoogw@rhodes.edu
In the 1970’s, there was an American popular song with the words: "War,… what is it good for? …absolutely nothing!" The music featured strong rhythmic accents on beats two and four in driving rock patterns; the melody featured a broken line, with something of a violent grunt, depicting those words. The melodic motion was stepwise, almost chant-like in its contour, representing quasi-religious overtones for this text, creating artistic irony. This song was written during the Vietnam War, and became one rallying cry for millions of Americans as an artistic voice against that war. As a musician, one feels acutely compelled to be social-conscious, as art tends to reflect and/or influence society. Music has historically been borne out of a society as a result of conditions surrounding its inception, and has often been a vehicle used to influence society at such times. Social stimulation generally casts a significant influence upon a composer, whether conscious or not.

Much music is conceived during times of war; from drum and brass fanfares inspiring military personnel to action-- glorifying war on one hand, to music that reflects the fears of a people adversely and tragically affected by it. The aftermath of the American Civil War was ripe with poetry, much of which inspired songs-- songs as tributes to both sides; songs as a condemnation of the personal nature of that war. Many poems and letters were written during and after that war; writings that later became substance for songs - solo songs and choral compositions. Rather than glorifying war, this music begs, and even demands sanity to prevail, calling for the end to such horrific events.

As a twenty-first century musician, I read poetry and critically listen to the character of music that emanated from various wars. Much of that music remains relevant today, and could have easily been written for wars like the current one in Afghanistan. Poignant poetry written by American poet Walt Whitman and other civil war witnesses serve as intense reminders of the personal nature of that war. It is one thing to institutionalize a violent act of aggression; quite another to experience it directly. When I program such music on my concerts, it is always with a deep desire to make it immediate and relevant for contemporary audiences, with a personal and perhaps political goal in mind. This is consistent with the goals of the poets and the composers. That is why I wish to present this topic at the conference. The conference in Hawaii would be an ideal setting for the dissemination of a paper regarding musical literature about war; Hawaii was, of course, the scene of one of the most devastating attacks in American history.

Vocal music, choral music in particular, colors and characterizes an interpretation of text, as the voice is almost universally alleged to be the most personal musical instrument of all. Singers are able to deliver a musical setting of poetry in a manner that intensifies and illuminates it, rendering it anything but institutional and impersonal.
The paper I propose to speak to discusses two major works based on anti-war texts; not so much political statements, but as artistic, personal and universal ones. Many composers have set anti-war poetry to music from various wars, a few of which serve as hallmarks in the genre as acclaimed musical masterworks written by significant composers of our time. Such is the case with each of the works in this study.

The works I would address are *War Requiem*, by Benjamin Britten, and *Dona Nobis Pacem*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams. In the case of Britten’s masterpiece, the work was written after World War II for the re-dedication of St. Michael’s Church, in England, which was destroyed during that war. He wrote this work as a monument to society, calling on the world to end such horrors. It was intended as a Requiem to all wars, and is set to poetry by Wilfred Owen, a young poet who served and died in WWI just 6 days before Armistice. The poetry is poignantly juxtaposed with texts from the Requiem Mass for the Dead, taken directly from the Roman Liturgy. The interspersing of these texts is intense; uttered as a reprimand to a Church that would condone such actions in the name of religion. In the case of Vaughan Williams’ work, he wrote it in anticipation of World War II as war drums were again pounding across Europe, as a warning to the world against engaging in another such conflict; a warning which went sadly, unheeded. He uses multiple texts for peace, juxtaposed with a prayer taken directly from the Roman Mass, *Agnus Dei*, and of course, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, referencing the ‘sacrificial lamb of God,’ about the be sacrificed for all mankind, praying instead for peace and resolution.

In my study I have analyzed the texts and the manner in which music is specifically set for that text. Discussion illustrates how the music enhances and colors the text, and persuades the listener to a certain attitude by virtue of the artistic effects created; combining elements of music with text and text meaning. I will discuss the music from the standpoint of its specific elements: melody, harmony, rhythm, meter and textures, with a bent to the non-musician, so that they will be able to appreciate and understand the contents of the study. I will use recordings to augment my findings, providing the necessary examples for the audience. I would also sing some of the melodies and motives for them, drawing them into the intimacy of these works. Both of these works stand as cornerstones of anti-war literature in the history of music, and both stand as highpoints in the careers of two renowned composers.

I have presented elements of this paper at the International Conference on the Literature of War, Durrell School, Corfu Greece in 2008, at the Regional Fine Arts Festival at Lourdes College, Sylvania, Ohio in 2009, and at Rhodes College, in Memphis, Tennessee in 2009, as a visiting scholar, prior to my appointment here.

The following outline represents my paper:

- Introduction: Why the works were written
- Comparison of works
  - Texts chosen
  - Musical forces
  - Audience and artistic/political goals of the composers
• Backgrounds of text/poetry involved
  o Requiem Text (Liturgical) coupled with poetry of Wilfred Owen
  o Ordinary of the Mass coupled with poetry of Walt Whitman

• Music text relationship within works
  o Melody
  o Harmony
  o Rhythm/Meter
  o Textures/Accompaniment
  o Music-Text Relationships

• Societal effects of these Choral Music on War
  o Ripple effect
  o Attitudinal effect: children, youth, adults

My contact information is as follows:

William M. Skoog, D.A. Professor of Music
Elizabeth Daughdrill Fine Arts Chair
Director of Choral Studies
Rhodes College
Department of Music
2000 North Parkway
Memphis, TN 38112
skoogw@rhodes.edu
Plato and Aristotle were convinced that music had power to affect the character (Ethos) of people who would, in turn, change society for the better. As such, Music was a required part of the curriculum in the earliest stages of organized education (albeit their definition of Music was broader than is ours). The arts are often acclaimed to represent the best mankind has to offer, whereas war represents the worst. Music expresses emotions, generates thought, inspires and motivates people. Music set to text influences that text in a variety of ways, enhancing or coloring its meaning, or creating irony. Texts about war are, by nature, imbued with intense, colorful, penetrating images. Choral compositions on texts about war provide poignant examples of how music can characterize such texts, enhancing and intensifying the meaning of the text and bring home the effects of war.

Text expressed through music takes on added immediacy than text alone; the music impacts one emotionally and intimately, and the result is highly expressive and personal. Composers augment text through various means of manipulating elements of music. Melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, textures and instrumentation are devices that can be used to color the text, referred to as “text-painting” or “mood painting” devices. Often, musical components portray the text in obvious ways; e.g., fanfare-like melodies referring to bugle calls or percussive, rhythmic motives found indicating battlefield drums. Other times, however, the music portrays the text in ways that become ironic or paradoxical; a clashing chord set to the word “peace” for example, colors that word in a way that may not seem peaceful at all.

This thesis highlights a number of instances of music-text relationship in two pieces based on war poetry: *Dona Nobis Pacem* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, and *War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten. These works illustrate a variety of compositional techniques that set text in creative musical textures that breathe new life into it. These works do not extol war, but condemn its brutality and destruction, confront violent, intentional death squarely, and send out plaintive pleas for peace.

Both works are multi-textual; utilizing portions of the Roman Mass or Requiem Mass in original languages combined with anti-war poetry, speeches, and scripture. Ralph Vaughan Williams' work incorporates the *Agnus Dei* from the Roman Mass with war poetry by Walt Whitman, portions of scripture, and a few other sources. Vaughan Williams' work was written in 1936 when the drums of World War II were beginning to sound, in an attempt to warn society and to prevent such a war. Britten's *War Requiem* was written as a Requiem for those who had died in war and as a stark warning to society. In addition to using the Latin Requiem for the Dead (*Missa Pro Defunctis*), it contains poems by Wilfred Owen, a poet who fought and died in World War I. These two seemingly disparate texts intertwine, alternate, and poignantly color one another.

These two works are significant contributions to the world of music and are hallmarks of the composers’ lives and opuses. Each is significant in scope, requiring full orchestra, large mixed-voice chorus, soloists, and, in the Britten work, a boy’s choir and organ. While these composers share many commonalities, significant differences also exist in how these works were crafted and what emotional and psychological affects they impart to the listener. It is commonly said that music is a universal language; if this is so, it is used in these works to deliver a strong universal message: war inflicts pain and agony on people; “enemies” are perceived only- fabricated by governments to justify political objectives and ideals. According to the spirit of these artistic creations (words AND music), people share a universal humanity; the nature of war is disturbing,
ominous, horrifying; it is something to be grieved and condemned, not glorified and worshiped. The fact that these works touch audiences so profoundly and stand as musical monuments in the twentieth century speaks to the inspiration of each work, and the ongoing, compelling need to have them performed.

Choral Music as a Vehicle for Poetry

Choral composers customarily select a text before composing music, rather than the opposite. There are several reasons for this. First, choral composers seek musical inspiration from the text; text often spawns musical ideas. When I have commissioned composers to write pieces, without exception they asked for texts to consider, or they provide me with texts they would like to set to music. There is also the issue of scansion; poetry contains certain inherent rhythms, accents and stresses that exist in accordance with natural text inflections. These are called anacrusis and thesis, rises and falls in the syllabification of the text, which can be then coupled with musical/rhythmic stresses. Composers sometimes decide to set music to rhythmic accents in ways that contradict the natural accents of the poetry, drawing unique attention to the text accentuation.

Music may be written in a way that coincides with or reinforces inherent meaning of text, or without such regard. Often, composers will set music initially with keen regard for meaning of text, then develop the music without continuing concern for the text or its meaning (music-for-music’s-sake). Whether a text is rhymed, in poetic or prose form, comical or serious, whimsical or ironic, all are contributing factors for composition. In regards to the works considered here, foreign languages are a consideration, as they are poly-textual, combining Latin, Greek and English (prose and poetry) for their bases. Juxtaposing such language sources in a given work places an immediate and significant influence upon the composer and the compositional process.

Musical textures also grant intriguing choices for the setting of text. Whether a text is set for mixed chorus, men’s, women’s or children’s voices; male or female soloists; duets or trios are texture choices. Whether the text is set in homophony (one voice dominant with harmonic support), polyphony (independent multiple lines), or unisons, will also give the text different characteristics. Harmonic choices yield a varied palate of colors; whether harmony is considered consonant for words such as “peace,” or “death;” or highly dissonant and complex for texts that are tension-filled or violent is also a choice. Sometimes a composer will make choices that run counter to obvious text meanings, providing irony or a contradictory nature to the meaning of that word. The use of counterpoint, where all voices are independent and overlapping, grants a thicker texture to the music, whereas sparseness to the overall contrapuntal fabric would likely yield a different essence for those words. Rhythm and meter (the organization of beats into measures of certain lengths) are also considerations in setting the text; elongation of rhythmic values can stretch the meaning of certain words; truncation or syllabification (one syllable per note) can advance a lot of text quickly, as in a drama; broken rhythms can indicate a hesitation or grief in a text, and so on. Long, suspended, sustained note values would indicate a different quality for text than a series of short rhythmic values, depending on the composer’s interpretation. Choice of instrumentation/orchestration or lack thereof also plays a critical role in underscoring the text. Both of the works in this study have full orchestra (Britten’s work contains two orchestras in fact), offering a myriad of instrumental colors available to shade the text. The use of brass and percussion, for example, are found in these works to literally represent the sounds of a battlefield; musical patterns that are found imitated in the vocal parts.

The types and qualities of texts chosen for the works in this study are critical to analyses of the music. Vaughan Williams was writing in a time following “The Great War,” and at a time anticipating another world war. He lived in Great Britain, a central location for both of these wars, and was personally affected by threats of such a war breaking out. Art reflects society, and
society sometimes reflects art. As such, it was Vaughan Williams’ hope to use his art to persuade society against such a conflict. Texts chosen by this composer for this work were the *Agnus Dei* from the Roman Mass, poetry by Walt Whitman, readings by John Bright, and various biblical passages referencing war and peace. The text, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, appears as a recurring text throughout the work, interspersed with the other writings. To further reinforce this concept, the composer set a recurring musical theme associated with these words, creating a subliminal effect for this listener.

Benjamin Britten was a lifelong pacifist. His choice of a Requiem Mass, customarily used as a burial mass for the dead, in and of itself, would not necessarily be a work of pacifism. However, alternating sections of the Requiem Mass with graphic war poems written by a witness to World War I is a powerful combination indeed, conveying a vivid message against war coupled with some not-so-subtle finger pointing at the church. This was no reassuring burial mass that he composed, but a warning to all who could and might hear it.

Britten made his purpose clear by associating certain texts with musical textures. He set the Requiem Mass in original languages (Latin and Greek) for full chorus with predominant (operatic) soprano solo, traditional choices for musical Requiems throughout history (e.g., Requiems by Verdi, Mozart, Faure and Donizetti. In contrast, he set the poetry of Wilfred Owen, English poems that articulate sentiments of soldiers, eye--witness accounts and personal reflections about war, for tenor and baritone soloists and chamber orchestra (the tenor and baritone soloists often literally represent soldiers of opposing sides, for example). The use of chamber orchestra lends a more transparent, personal quality to the music that full orchestra, with less volume or density. Britten used a distinctive third textural choice, a boys' choir with organ for select portions of the Requiem text. The use of boys’ choir symbolizes innocence and purity; perhaps irony or hypocrisy of the religious orders. Through dark, thick textures of the full chorus and orchestra, and over and around the text set for soloists and chamber orchestra, floats the ethereal, cathedral-like tone of the boys with an instrument closely associated with traditional religion, an organ, on text that cries for peace amidst the complexities, horror, and death of war. The presence of the boys’ choir is in stark contrast to the rest of the work, symbolizing innocence, and simultaneously questioning the future of a society that will be lost in war, conveyed simply and effectively by the presence of the young voices.

What ensues is a discussion of the two works, briefly tracing the development of each, with representative examples of compositional techniques used to enhance the text. While there are countless instances to share regarding music-text relationship (these works are rich in such moments), only examples that represent the composers’ overall compositional style and approach to text will be cited.

**Ralph Vaughan Williams: *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936)**

**Background**

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) has been acclaimed as one of England’s most important
composers, is credited with reviving English music in the twentieth century, and with bringing a
distinctive quality and respect to the music of Great Britain. His music is known for use of folk
themes and idioms, a common and effective approach for a composer from any country whose
desire it may to be inspire nationalistic interest and pride. (Folk music, as music of the people, is
considered a direct way to base one’s music in a nationalistic idiom and style; touching people by
their own melodies or style of music). Although Vaughan Williams infrequently quotes folk
music, his style is well known for folk-like qualities that sound of melancholy, sadness,
spaciousness, and pastoral, lyric and serene essences.

Widely considered one of Vaughan Williams’ greatest works, Dona Nobis Pacem was composed
in the years advancing toward World War II, as a warning to humankind and in an artistic attempt
to help avoid the coming war. It was commissioned for the centenary of the Hunterfield Choral
Society, written in 1936 and premiered at the prestigious Three Choirs Festival in 1937. It was to
be performed again in 1939, a performance that ironically had to be cancelled as war broke out
across Europe, realizing the composer’s worst fears and allowing his warnings to go unheeded.

Vaughan Williams referred to this work as a Cantata. A Cantata can be varied forms in music;
derived from the Italian word, cantare meaning “to sing,” a cantata is usually a multi-movement
work, or a work written in several sections or distinct movements, performed by soloists and/or
choir and/or instrumentalists. Vaughan William’s work contains all of the above.

Vaughan Williams incorporated varied texts in this work. Dona Nobis Pacem (grant us peace) is a
text taken from the Agnus Dei of the Roman Mass and, as the title of the work indicates, a text
that pervades and unifies this work. It is significant that that is the only text from the Mass that
appears in this work. The literal translation of the entire text would be: “Lamb of God who takes
away the sins of the world, grant us peace.” This text in the mass refers to the sacrificial lamb,
Jesus Christ, as he approaches the cross and his impending crucifixion. Dona Nobis Pacem is a
text taken from the end of that section of text, seeking peace. The vast majority of text that
Vaughan Williams selected for this work was anti-war poetry by Walt Whitman. Vaughan
Williams borrowed from himself early on in this work, with a 1911 setting of an ironic, angry
Walt Whitman poem entitled, Beat! Beat! Drums! He also utilized Civil War poems by Whitman
including Drum Taps, Reconciliation, and the Dirge for Two Veterans.

The Whitman poems are varied and yield a mixture of messages and a wide array of colors for the
composer to set. Beat! Beat! Drums! is an angry, sarcastic poem, filled with irony and bitterness
towards war. It indicates the ongoing, ceaseless, uncaring rhythm of war; its autonomous and
seemingly self-prolonging life span. The harsh realities of war affects everyone in this poem; no
one escapes its mockery and violence; not businesses, houses, nor children. No one is exempt
from war’s horrors; it is universal and institutional; impersonal yet deeply personal. The other
poems of Whitman are of a rather different nature than this one; Reconciliation and Dirge for
Two Veterans are intensely intimate and personal. The former is uttered by one soldier who has
killed another, recognizes his own humanity in the one he has slain and the value of the very man
he has killed in a moment of intensely personal revelation and mourning. The latter is a reflection
upon a father and son who have died together in battle and are being placed in two coffins, side-
by-side, in the ghostly moonlight.

To these, he added excerpts from an admonitory speech made by John Bright in the British House
of Commons during the Crimean War of the 1850’s, and scriptural verses from a variety of
sources. The scriptural sources include the words of the prophet Jeremiah pleading for a balm
amidst great famine, and words of comfort and hope from Daniel: “Fear not, peace be among
thee, be strong.” Finally, we find words from St. Luke uttered during the Christmastide message
of the Christmas heritage, “Peace, good will toward men.” This traditional message of hope and
good will finds itself juxtaposed with poetry of Whitman on war. Alternating with these texts, the Mass text (Dona Nobis Pacem) recurs, sung by the soprano and sometimes by the choir, echoing the composer’s warning and prayer for the world. This combination of poetry provided Vaughan Williams with an abundance of colorful metaphors and emotional imagery that yield sources for composition and color. The music brings the already meaningful poetry to life in new and interesting ways that engage an audience with its riveting message. Dona Nobis Pacem is scored for full orchestra (full woodwinds, brass, percussion, harp, strings), soprano and baritone soloists and full chorus, lasting around 40 minutes.

**Music-Text Relationship**

The piece opens with the text Agnus Dei, customarily the closing movement of the Latin Mass or late movement in a Requiem. The complete text translates: “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us, grant us peace,” the last few words serving as repeated text in the work. Of note, however, is how this text historically serves the Mass as a whole. As the mass is a celebration of the Eucharist (the Last Supper), the Agnus Dei represents Christ on his way to the cross; the Lamb of God is indeed the “sacrificial lamb.” How fitting that Vaughan Williams should choose this text for an ant-war theme; Christ himself serves as a symbol that sacrificial lambs will indeed be lost.

The first musical utterance is a shrill, unison note articulated by the woodwinds and strings, which sounds a warning cry and penetrating beginning to this work. The soprano soloist follows quickly behind this with the opening theme, which appears at various times in the work. Her opening melody is chant-like; seemingly derived from chant, as it is narrow in melodic range, and moves stepwise. Her voices floats and above the orchestra, ethereal in nature, rising and falling in melodic contour (the shape of a given melody), as a pleading prayer. Her melody moves to a high range, set repeatedly, as the recurring melodic motives and text serve as shrill pleas for peace. This melodic setting creates an urgent call, sobbing pleas for peace (example 1).
Example 1: Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, p. 5

On the heels of this solo the chorus enters, reiterating the soloist’s theme first in imitative entrances, then in clashing D-flat major chords that strike against a G-pedal tone, with rising, surging motives in the orchestra. The dynamics are forte (loud), the orchestration dense, and the
chords are harsh for such a text (“Grant us Peace”), representing a people incessantly crying to God for peace, (example 1). The movement ends in a reflective, quiet way, with the soloist positioned very low in her range accompanied by repeated rhythmic motives in percussion and low strings, setting an ominous mood at the conclusion of this prayer (example 1). One can see immediately Vaughan Williams’ approach to text that will continue throughout this work; melody, harmony, textures (voices used) and instrumentation will set moods in ways that dramatically color mood or meaning in the text. The opening portion of music would convey that there is turbulence here; this is not serenity embodied in music.

Typical for this work, there is no pause between “movements,” rather one segues immediately into another without interruption. Movement II begins with a sharp blast in the horns followed quickly by fanfares in the trumpets. Beat! Beat! Drums! is the most violent of Whitman’s poems found in this work. Fitting for this poem, incessant brass fanfares and constant, driving percussion instruments dominate this movement, as these instruments graphically depict the sounds of battle. The orchestral introduction grows and swells, as instruments are added and crescendo as the battle draws closer. This builds to a climax, culminating in the entrance of the chorus on chant-like rhythms, almost shouting in demand for the drums to beat and the bugles to blow. The voices almost emulate the instruments in the amount of entrances and types of melodic and rhythmic motives set. Short, marcato, repeated rhythmic motives are frequent, and constant open intervals of a fifth in the choir emulates the calls of bugles and the hard pounding of drums in a fierce and relentless battle. These intervals move in parallel motion, providing no consonant intervals of relief or resolution for the listener, as one key to the movement’s effectiveness. Vaughan Williams’ simultaneous use of varied devices portrays the comprehensiveness and chaos of war (example 2).
Example 2: Ralph Vaughan Williams, Dona Nobis Pacem, p. 6

There is much text in this poem, many lines to be delivered in dramatic fashion. While melody, lyricism and harmonic beauty may dominate Vaughan Williams’ writing elsewhere, that is not true for much of this movement. Short, rhythmic motives and vocal lines imitating bugles are prominent here. Much of this movement is set syllabically, the choir often sings only one syllable per note, which gives a declamatory and dramatic effect to the text and advances it quickly, efficiently, and emphatically. The orchestra perpetuates the fanfare-like triplets and rhythmic passages underneath the chorus, offering the essence of war drums, and plays fanfare-like interludes between choral sections, heightening the tension of an ongoing battle. Descriptive rhythms are set for onomatopoeic renderings like, “…then rattle quicker, heavier drums,” (example 3), and lengthy melismas (more than one note per syllable) are used to portray fanfares by bugles, (example 2). The music rises and falls with descriptions in the text; no one is exempt from the affects of this battle as it moves through and overpowers everyone in its path. The music, joined to the poem become intensely realistic and personal; the drums and bugles are relentless, the effect for the listener is at times deafening, overwhelming and relentless. This is the darkest, most dramatic war poem by Whitman found in this work, and the music in this movement in likewise the most relentless, rhythmically driving, and impacting in this work. Melody is almost disregarded in favor of punctuating chords, rhythms, in extreme tessituras,
combined for dramatic delivery and affect. Most melodic fragments are short iterations of text uttered for poetic delivery and reinforced by many voices, with limited melodic length or range. An example with different text but similar melodic/rhythmic writing is found in example 4, typical of his descriptive techniques.

There is a middle section that deceptively sounds of pseudo-repose; the text and music here are mocking and ironic, as the poet tells us that no one will escapes this. The beauty of the music is for those victims mentioned in the text (the old man, the child, the weeper, the prayer) the music seems to represent these innocents, but Whitman reminds us that none of them will escape the horrors of war; that war knows no fairness or justice, or almost as if having a life of its own, will attack anyone in its path. “…not the timid or the old man…not the weeper or the prayer…not the child’s voice nor the mother’s entreaties will be heard.” The music during this section is lyric and serene, almost deriding the innocents mentioned, and voice pairs are used for word-painting textures, as women sing of the “timid,” men of “old men” and the like. (A sample of Vaughan Williams’ use of lyricism for mood painting is found in example 3, with a different text). A quick return to the beating of the drums reminds us of this incessant battle, when we return to the insistence of war: “Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting in hearses!”

The movement builds to a musical climax, much like a battle, winding down at the end with decreasing utterances of the drums as the sounds of the battle are decaying as if moving away.

Movement II elides into movement III without pause, as the sound of diminishing drumbeats gives way to a beautiful, ethereal, suspended theme in the violins, a melody reminiscent of the opening *Agnus Dei* melodic contour. Here, the composer uses an introspective and intimate poem by Whitman, *Reconciliation*, a text involving two soldiers, one of whom has killed the other, and recognizes in his dead “enemy” his own humanity. To this very personal poetry, Vaughan Williams sets music for baritone soloist and much thinner orchestration, with minimal brass and percussion. The music, as the text, is in stark contrast to the previous movement. The strings and woodwinds essentially carry this movement, and the choir sings the bulk of its words here in a beautiful, exposed, a cappella setting repeating the soloist’s text. There is tremendous musical coloring of text here; as Whitman refers to the “…deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,” the music is lyric, serene, and eerily beautiful, belying the death and destruction that surrounds one on the battlefield (example 3).
Example 3: Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, p. 28

The musical contrast from the second movement to the third is considerable. In the third movement, the composer sculpted a beautiful, lyric melody in contrast to the rhythmic and bugle-
like motives of the preceding movement. For *Reconciliation*, the melody is spun out over several measures, almost as if one were gliding through a mist in the battlefield, surveying the damage, and sensing the peace and serenity of those who have already moved on to another world. The main text appears three times; first in the baritone solo with orchestral accompaniment, second in the choir with strings and woodwinds primarily, and thirdly, for a cappella choir. The orchestra provides us with meaningful commentary; providing “death chords” that are dissonant in nature, revealing an ominous attribute to this seeming calm after the storm. All is probably not well, but we may not know this without the orchestral intrusions on an otherwise serene scene. At the very end of this movement the soprano soloist returns, once again uttering the text *Dona Nobis Pacem*, set in a now familiar musical leitmotiv (recurring theme that by its very appearance brings to mind, subliminally, a person, event or concept) in a haunting end to this mournful and reflective section. Vaughan Williams is not quite content to leave it at that; the choir finishes on an E-- Major triad that could be taken as a peaceful and serene conclusion to this movement, but the soloist descends on her theme through that key, and ends on F-natural, a tone completely foreign to the key of E--Major, providing an example of music’s power to influence text; there is a disturbing cloud hanging over this; the music indicates that we have not heard the final word (example 3).

The F--natural indicated in example 3 bridges movements III to IV as we progress into another of Whitman’s poems, *Dirge for Two Veterans*. In this movement the composer borrows from himself, having composed a small form choral work to this text in 1911. Here we see a reiteration of war’s drums, but now in a low ostinatto (regular, repeated rhythmic pattern), as in a funeral procession. The whole movement can be heard as a slow progression, a steady, plodding funeral march. The choral parts are set essentially in homophony, the consonant and beautiful harmonies seem to indicate a certain peacefulness and even nobility; perhaps acceptance of a most personal tragedy of war, the death of father and son on the same battlefield, who now head for a “double grave.” Musical text painting is almost literal, as voice pairs and alternating voice parts indicate the two men “dropped” together, the rhythms and use of voice pairs indicating the motion of the men suddenly “dropping,” (example 4).
Example 4: Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, p. 37

The scene found in the poetry is set by the music; it is nighttime, the moon is full and shining down in a ghostly moonlight, depicted in the orchestra. The choir and orchestra indicate the approaching of the “full-keyed bugles” in an optimistic key, C-Major, building to a powerful climax as bugles draw near. This is an excellent illustration of how Vaughan Williams uses the orchestra to take us into the drama of the poetry and setting. This section concludes with a powerful and uplifting orchestral interlude featuring brass, as this most noble procession reaches its peak. Were it not for the ominous, foreboding nature of this work, and the tragedy expressed in the poetry, one would feel nobility and strength from Vaughan Williams’ music; a virtual statement of musical irony or satire.

The procession seems to halt momentarily, as Vaughan Williams suspends the harmonic and rhythmic progression. The drums also pause, as the graveyard spreads out before us in the mist, and witnesses to this scene halt and reflect on the overwhelming peacefulness of this time, place, and somber occasion. The procession then continues with the return of rhythmic drive with drums, as the chorus and orchestra build to the movement’s climax “O Strong dead march, you please me!” This movement concludes, not with the Latin text, but rather, with the chorus in a homophonic utterance of acceptance and a personal prayer of hope for the two slain soldiers, “My heart gives you love,” again concluding in the key of C-Major. The orchestra provides a reflective moment, as it concludes with intermittent drums and a restatement of the lyric theme, as the Dirge has concluded. The music, then, gives us this progression: a slow Dirge to the graveyard; the somber atmosphere surrounding this tragic tale; the depiction of moonlight and a misty graveyard, the emotional passion and conflicted feelings of a father and son being dropped on a battlefield coupled with the essence of glory for having died in battle, a time of reflection on and grief for the departed, the honoring of their souls, and the procession departing.

John Bright’s penetrating words (“The Angel of Death has been abroad...”) forcefully begin the
final movement, set in recitative style (quasi-spoken to pitches, with dry rhythmic motives indicating rhythms of speech) with baritone soloist accompanied by solo cello and percussion. The chorus interrupts this tranquil moment with harsh and sudden outbursts of the text, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, reminiscent of the opening of the work, and the soprano soloist soaring again over the top of chorus and orchestra proclaiming the same text. Like the opening of the work, this is not a calm, serene setting of the text; we have not progressed very far. The chorus continues on text from the scriptures, “We looked for peace,” and Vaughan Williams uses counterpoint to create an ongoing essence of one’s search for peace, dividing men’s and women’s voices, indicating numerous people struggling to find peace (like the setting of *Beat! Beat! Drums*, where the composer sets voice pairs for mood painting, he does this again here, using counterpoint and voice pairs to deepen the meaning of the text).

The words of Daniel, “O man greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee,” begins a new section of music that is at last uplifting and hopeful. The words are optimistic, and the music is lovely and beautiful; this time not tinged with irony or sarcasm, but one complementing the other. This develops as a continuous movement of hope and optimism, using texts from several sources in scripture, building into a Christmas-like section from the book of Luke that almost seems to not belong in such a work, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” The music features full orchestra, chorus in major key (C—Major, the same key Vaughan Williams selected for the full-keyed bugles, and the strong dead march in the earlier movement), celebrative motives in the bells and chimes, reminiscent of church bells, and is set in three-four time, used often throughout music history for dance-like movements of uplift and joy; such is the setting here (example 5).

Example 5: Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, p. 62
Because of this movement, one might conclude with Vaughan Williams’ work that there is hope to be found. The work ends with final repeated statements from the choir, segueing from “good will towards men” into *Dona Nobis Pacem*, as the soprano soloist utters the final statements of those words similar to the opening theme. The work concludes without orchestra, with quiet chorus alternating with soloist on the title of this work, with one pointed musical point: the soloist finishes on the third of the chord, alone, after the choir has finished, indicating a sense of unfinished business. If the soloist sang the root of a major triad at the end, one might conclude that there was some finality here, or a genuine hope for peace. Finishing on the third of the chord, however, leaves us hanging a bit, and gives the impression that this may not be the last word on the subject. This work begins and ends on a single musical note; at the beginning, it is a piercing, penetrating unison tone on a high note (D) in the woodwinds and strings, at the end, a low E, near the bottom of the range, sung quietly by the soprano soloist. The listener is left to interpret the message Vaughan Williams wished to convey by framing a work entitled *Dona Nobis Pacem* in such a fashion (example 6).

*Example 6: Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, p. 62*
**Benjamin Britten: War Requiem (1962)**

**Background**

Like Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was a twentieth century British composer, and, like his compatriot, one of the pinnacles of his career is his War Requiem. This was Britten’s final work for chorus and orchestra, and it is a monumental work by musical standards, forces, length and gravity of text. Eighty-five minutes in length, written for three different bodies of performers, physically separated in performance, it is a monument not to preservation of peace, but to condemnation of war. Like Vaughan Williams', is multi-lingual, synthesizing texts from two distinctly different sources and languages: anti-war poetry interwoven with the Liturgical Requiem Mass, not without religious and social commentary. Britten chose the poetry of Wilfred Owen, a British soldier and poet who fought in and died in World War I. His poetry was published posthumously; he was mortally wounded and died seven days before Armistice in 1918. Owen’s writings come from an individual who had experienced war at an intensely personal level, through the eyes of someone who had witnessed the atrocities of war and, as a participant, observed and experienced them. His poetry, therefore, is intensely personal and disturbingly descriptive. Britten selected this poetry by Owen, surrounding it with sections of the Missa Pro Defunctis (Requiem Mass for the Dead).

In contrast to Vaughan Williams, Britten used several sections of the Requiem Mass so that this work in actuality becomes a turbulent, dark Requiem woven with strands of war poetry in a way that characterizes the Requiem itself. Britten carefully selected and aligned poetry of Owen that contained symbols and language paralleling the Requiem text itself (detailed below, in the analysis). Missa Pro Defunctis is customarily used for burial, a service of hope for the living and peace and salvation for the dead. Owen’s poetry does not glamorize or glorify war, but to the contrary, he refers to the atrocities and hypocrisies of war, especially when referring to religious tenets justifying war; his poetry flying in the face of the purpose and intention of a Requiem Mass in religious service. These two types of text, found side-by-side, create a symbiotic relationship that call into question spiritual or human justifications for war based on religious beliefs.

The work is enormous and grand yet simultaneously intimate in its character, performing forces, and affect. It is scored for full orchestra and chorus, boys’ choir, organ, chamber orchestra, soprano, baritone and tenor soloists. Performance specifications indicate that there is to be a physical separation between performance forces, to distinguish the nature of the text, and effectiveness of the music. At center stage, is the full chorus, orchestra and soprano soloist, delivering the message of the Requiem Mass. The tenor and bass soloist, representing soldiers from different sides, and the chamber orchestra are off to the side, delivering essentially the poetry of Owen. Finally, the boys’ choir and organ are to be set off stage, at a distance, representing a detachment from all of this, and perhaps a representation of future days as well. The organ that accompanies the boys’ choir, an instrument primarily associated with church services, adds religious, pseudo-peaceful, innocent overtones to the Requiem texts sung by them.

*War Requiem* was composed for Saint Michael’s Cathedral, in Coventry, England, a church that had been built in Medieval times and was fire-bombed during World War II, its interior destroyed and roof obliterated (“To the glory of God, this Cathedral Burned”—the inscription at St. Michael's). A mere shell remained of the original church, the rest was scarred and in ruins. A new facility was constructed following the war, but the shell of the old Cathedral was allowed to stand near the new facility as a haunting reminder. It was for the re-dedication of the Cathedral that this work was commissioned, premiering on May 30, 1962. Britten dedicated the work “…in loving memory to four friends who perished in World War II.” He inscribed their names inside the score along with Owen’s words: *My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is the pity... All a
that Benjamin Britten wrote a Requiem that denounces war does not come as a great surprise to those who know this composer. He was a life-long pacifist, and in fact dedicated this work to four friends who perished during World War I. Even the selection of the soloists, hand-picked by Britten for the premier, made a socio-political statement: Dietrich Fischer-Diskau, a German baritone, Galina Vishnevskaya, a Russian soprano, and Peter Pears, a British tenor and close friend (the soprano was not allowed to leave Russia, due to political sensitivities, and had to be replaced at the last minute). The selection of solo timbres is also descriptive musically; the soprano voice is commonly chosen by composers of Requiems to soar above the crowd, ethereally, dramatically, and spiritually. Britten uses that voice in that way here. The choice of tenor and baritone voices to deliver the poetry of Owen, is noteworthy, in that these are male voices, to represent male soldiers, and at times, the very voice of the poet himself. The boys’ voices represent an ethereal purity of the church, (singing only in Latin), representing youth, innocence, and symbolically, future generations.

The manifestation of his pacifistic philosophy is ever-present in Britten's musical settings of the texts he chose. The nature of the musical writing, the musical craftsmanship unique settings of the poetry and the Requiem text conveys a clear and profound emotional message; this is a reality-check and warning of the highest order. If Britten could take the audience to the battlefield, musically and poetically, and burn deep within us the sounds, sights, emotions, and personal nature of this, imbuing it with dark, spiritual overtones (and undertones) of condemnation, he would do so, and perhaps has done so. He is trying, through music, to mark within us an acute social consciousness, no more so than within the church itself. In all of choral literature, even when considering the other works in my study, this work is in a class of its own.

Britten's work seems to be somewhat of an oxymoron; is it a Requiem Mass for the Dead, a Burial Mass, a setting of poetry, a work for peace, and/or a remonstration against war? The answer is a resounding, "yes" to all. The work when described in overview, would seem to demand separation musically and poetically, that the Requiem would be set in specific movements one way, the poetry of Owen another, creating two compositions in one, perhaps. When considering the performing forces, and specifications for separate locations, this would seem to be the case. One could assume that the work would be sectionalized and categorized accordingly into musical form. In fact, the form of the work is only part of the genius of its effectiveness; the sections merge and segue one to another; themes overlap; instrumentation overlaps, and even texts, melodies, and rhythmic motives merge and overlap with one another, creating an almost seamless dialogue and interchange throughout the work. There is a constant give-and-take within the text and music.

Throughout the work, Britten overlaps sections of text with music, assigning musical themes that are identified with portions of text, creating subliminal (and sometimes obvious) connections. Different movements incorporate fragments of motives from one another, making musical connections between them. Britten musically "cross-fertilizes" the text and emotions of the Requiem with those of Owens, each influencing and gilding the other. Where Vaughan Williams does this with poetry and the Agnus Dei/Dona Nobis Pacem text Britten does with a bulk of the Requiem text, evolving, alternating, combining, and commenting one upon the other.

The work begins and ends in similar character. The opening Introit (Requiem aeternam) is set to tempo “Slow and solemn,” and features a dirge-like surging rhythm. However, Britten uses this rhythmic motive sparingly, as a specific color, as a recurring factor (it even appears as a
subliminal effect during the *Libera Me*, for example). Over this rhythmic figure, Britten places short, quiet, chant-like utterances of the choir to the text, "Requiem Aeternam." These motives build and grow, and are expanded into longer phrases and counterpoint, set against one another a tritone apart, (an interval of an augmented fourth), an interval referred to in the Middle Ages as *diabolus in musica* (the devil in music), banned by theorists of the period due to its highly dissonant nature (an augmented fourth is a highly discordant interval, consisting of three whole tones). The tritone is a unifying device used by Britten throughout this work, which by itself is telling. This section develops with ominous orchestral interludes, until the boys’ choir enters to the Latin text, *Te decet hymnus*, on a lyric melody, set to organ. Here, the boys’ voices sound innocent and pure riding over the top of the established textures. At the conclusion of this brief section, however, the boys also adopt the tritone in their parts, echoed by the choir, ultimately joined with a surging rhythm in the orchestra. We are now musically aware that this is no typical Requiem/burial service, clearly not providing peace and comfort to those who have lost someone. On the contrary, this is a lengthy introduction clueing us that there is much yet to be said, laced with forlorn, angst, despair, tension, and foreboding. Even the chimes, representative of church bells, ring with this tritone interval, not the peaceful, reassuring chimes one might expect in a Liturgical Requiem. In the illustration below, the tritone is found in the boys’ choir and in contrapuntal writing with the full choir; rhythmic surges in the strings symbolizing death are also seen (example 7).
As a Requiem begins with a text praying for eternal rest for those who have passed, Britten selected an opening poem by Owen that begins: “What passing bells,” finishing the opening section with the sounds of the “bells” for those who had “passed.” A little later in this movement, Britten has assigned the boys’ choir to the text “Te Decet Hymnus,” and the ensuing poetry of Owen references them, as the tenor sings, “…Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes, shall shine the holy glimmer of goodbyes.” This kind of music-text interplay is common in this work,
and illuminating. In typical formal construction in this work, the conclusion of the first section segues immediately into the second, as the large orchestra gives way to the chamber orchestra, chorus giving way to soloists with Owen's poetry, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. Britten’s music here, and often, reflects literally and figuratively what is found in the text. This is seen in specific melodic directions and descriptive rhythms that are used (bugle calls, bells, drums, gunfire, etc), and onomatopoetic words illustrated musically as well. The following example contains the sound of bugle's calls in the horn, and typical Britten solo text paining in the melody; as he sings of “sad shires,” the melody lingers and dips, as he sings of candles being held, it ascends; and, when singing “to speed them all,” as if this might be an elevation of souls, a single word sustained on several ascending tones while the strings continue the rhythmic death-surge, building to a dramatic climax, while the harp portrays a heavenly quality. (example 8).

Example 8: Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Vocal Score, p. 16

This section finishes with the *Kyrie*, in an unusual requiem setting. A customary Requiem would go from the *Introit* into the *Kyrie* without interruption, and the *Kyrie* might be an extended
section of music to satisfy liturgical function. Britten has sandwiched in Owen's poetry in a way that unifies and intertwines rather than separates the texts, an overall trait common to this work. The *Kyrie* is set for a cappella choir, is VERY brief, and concludes on an F--Major triad, providing a musical peacefulness, acceptance or resignation here; Lord indeed, have mercy. The brevity of this section and its musical usage THREE times in this work is evidence of a sarcastic stab at the church and its arrogance as seen by Britten during this war. These sections occur at the beginning, middle and end of the piece (example 9).

Repeated bugle-call musical patterns bridge these two movements, seen at the beginning of the *Dies Irae*. This is the longest, most involved movement in Britten's work, existing in nine sections, using text of the Requiem and four of Owen's poems, and is the peak of the work, even though it is only the second official movement. (In many ways, one can see Britten borrowing from Verdi here; the *Dies Irae* is set in the same key as that movement by Verdi- g minor, it is the longest, most developed movement in the work, colorful and dramatic; the soprano solo is operatic in vocal demand; the orchestra is huge and voluminous; the colors are full blown and operatic). Typical of Britten, the bugle call that starts this movement belongs to the preceding section connected to text by Owen (“Bugles sang, saddening the evening air,”) with sounds of a battle; simultaneously announcing the *Tuba Mirum* which is yet to come. This bugle-like section evolves directly into the *Dies Irae*, set in 7/4 time. 7/4 meter, with its irregular, asymmetrical musical accents, shifts the text on to and off of different beats than one might expect. Symmetrical, trochaic tetrameters indigenous to the Latin text are shuffled to other beats, and sound anything but staid, balanced, or pedantic. This section takes on a rather ominous,
threatening quality; an imbalanced, staggered march quality, achieved by the constantly shifting accents in this meter. Example 10 shows the opening bugle calls and the 7/4 *Dies Irae* theme.

Example 10: Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Vocal Score, p. 20

The musical affect of this section is one of uncertainty and fearfulness, rather than one of confidence in the outcome. Surely this must be the march of the damned, as opposed to a hope for salvation. Every section contains a fragmented melodic line, with continually interrupted melodic phrases. Each section concludes with a scalar passage, ascending or descending, set to a synthetic scale (almost whole-tone; not a typical modal or diatonic scale) that reinforces angst. This is followed by bugle calls set imitatively, as if sounding from a distance, with occasional bursts of
hunting horns- a curious inclusion musically in this movement- announcing that the “Judge shall come, and … the accursed will be consigned to flames.” Another section of Dies Irae text is reiterated in this asymmetrical meter. The music seems to be indicating an approaching calamity; building and rising to a furor. Brass interludes play a significant role in this, and loud, intermittent bursts of percussion seem to indicate a great struggle or perhaps battle. Britten uses the orchestra, here, much like Vaughan Williams and Hindemith, as described above; the instrumentation is used, without text, to highlight and depict aspects of the text without benefit or hindrance of words.

More statements of fragmented bugle calls are picked up and exchanged in various sections of the orchestra, the descending scalar theme of the chorus recurs, and the music moves us to the text: “Mors Stupebit;” (“death will be stunned”) set softly and in counterpoint, as if people were “stunned.” These musical ideas; bugle fanfares, 7/4 themes in the chorus, and scalar motives are used to segue to the next section of music, poetry by Owen, “Bugles sang” (the poem is untitled), set for baritone solo and chamber orchestra. The bugle calls in particular transport us to the voice of the soldier. The solo lines are descriptive, word painting abounds, and the personal nature of war is carefully brought home. We seem to know this soldier, empathizing with his sentiments at a deep and personal level. Lines like: “Voice of boys were by the riverside,” ascend melodically, as if voices at night would rise above the quiet of the air. Poetic lines like “Sleep mothered them” and “The shadow of the morrows weighed on them” are set to descending melodies. As an example, “Voices of old despondency resigned,” ascend, and in the same poem, “Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept” descends to a quiet, ethereal cadence, with the oboe and flute picking up the triplets of the bugle calls, ascending and fading away to nothing, as if “sleep” carried them off.

The Requiem text returns suddenly without warning; the soprano soloist enters dramatically on the warning text “Liber Scriptus proferetur,” (“a written document will be brought forth…from which all will be judged”) with the orchestra resounding the surging, dotted rhythms- a musical warning that the record may be unfavorable. This section is in total contrast to the poetry of Owen and the sleepy quality of the preceding section. Dialogue continues set in counterpoint in the chorus, the dotted rhythmic motives in the orchestra, and the soaring, “judging” voice of the soprano soloist, through the Rex Tremendae portion of text. Without the inclusions by Owen this might simply be a quasi-operatic utterance of a Requiem Mass, like those set by Verdi or Mozart. But Britten’s is thoroughly tempered by the war poetry. The prayer, “Salva me,” instead of providing assurance of salvation, becomes an uncertain plea for deliverance; without any confidence that it will come. This section of the Requiem segues immediately into more of Owen’s poetry (Out There We’ve Walked), in a mocking duet: “Out There, we’ve walked quite friendly up to death,” set to an ascending melody, with driving rhythms in the orchestra. Clearly, in the text and the music, there is no fear here; the soldiers mock death, and invite him as a “chum.” They “whistled while he shaved us with his scythe”; a section accompanied by a ‘whistling’ piccolo, and “laughed,” a musical section that imitates the character of ‘laughter’ (example 11A). There is an ironic twist to all of this, as it is set directly against the Requiem text when one would appear with fear and trembling before a Judge. This section concludes with the text, “when each proud fighter brags he wars on Death, for life, not men, for flags…” as the music winds down with ascending and fading lines in the woodwinds and strings, as if musically to emulate the futility of giving up one’s life for a flag. The flags seem to flutter away as the music concludes in ascending lines (example 11B).
Example 11A: Benjamin Britten: War Requiem, Conductor's Score, p. 53

Example 11B: Benjamin Britten: War Requiem, Conductor's Score, p. 55
A return to Requiem text ensues in the Recordare; which is one of the most lyric and beautiful sections of Britten’s piece. A broad, linear melody weaves through the women’s voices; a serene and lovely sound compared to what has come before (“remember, merciful Jesus”). This continues until male voices enter to the text, “Confutatis, maledictis,” (“confounded and cursed”) set rhythmically and heavily in contrast. The rhythms in the strings and the syllabification of the men’s parts provide dramatic disparity for meaning. Juxtaposed with the poetry of Owen and the intimacy of the solo writing providing background and reference, the Requiem takes on a different meaning altogether; one of scorn and contempt. The tenors and basses continue in duet until they build to a peak with the orchestra, segueing into yet another Owen poem, On Seeing a Piece of our Artillery Brought into Action, introduced by baritone soloist. As this aria begins, the timpani indicate the “guns,” uttered later in the text. The melody for the baritone ascends to the text: “Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,” again the guns are indicated in the timpani, as the baritone sings of them: “Great gun towering t’ward heaven.” Once again, Britten couples the text sections (Requiem and Owen’s poetry) with musical motives; as the baritone sings this text by Owen, the orchestra reiterates the synthetic scale of the Dies Irae, in a long, descending pattern. The baritone aria builds to a dramatic crescendo and high point on the text: “May God curse thee and cut thee from our soul,” picking up the bugle calls and hunting horns in the orchestra, referencing the text of the men’s voices (Confutatis, maledictis-“cursed”) returning to the distinctive motives of the Dies Irae 7/4 march, this time set in full chorus, block chords, with high tessituras, with full orchestra and punctuating brass, sounding a colossal warning of this “Day of Ire and Wrath.”

As this section reaches its climax and winds down musically, it moves directly into the Requiem text, Lacrimosa (“Day of weeping”). Britten connects this beautiful, lyric moment with the turbulence of the former section, using the 7/4 meter with a broken rhythm, but this time set on the beats instead of off beats, in low tessituras, pianissimo (very quiet and hushed) for the chorus, with soprano soloist singing a beautiful descending, lyric line, also broken in rhythm, indicating sobbing and weeping motions. The text connection between Latin and Owens is again striking. The Latin, “O how tearful that day, on which the guilty shall rise from the embers to be judged,” and Owens poem (Futility): “Move him into the sun - gently its touch awoke him once...always woke him, even in France.” The contrast is striking- where he always rose, now, he will not. This is a “day of tears” indeed--personal and dark.

The objective, universal day of weeping (Lacrimosa) becomes a very personal moment of grief for this soldier who is dying. This alternating of texts and musical ideas continues through the saga of this dying soldier; ultimately asking the question no one wants to ask but everyone is wondering. In Owen’s words, “Was it for this the clay grew tall?” The music alternates between sections of the Lacrimosa and the poem, making a tight weave of poetry and concept. This section concludes with a cappella choir singing “Pie Jesu Domine, Dona eis requiem, Amen” (Merciful Lord Jesus, grant them rest”). The choral section ends again on an F—Major triad; indicating resignation or perhaps acceptance. This soft, serene ending brings the Dies Irae to a close, in stark contrast to the musical drama with which it had begun (example 9, above).

The next major section of the work is the Offertorium where, in the Requiem Mass, we “offer” ourselves to God. It is fitting that Britten should place it here next to another of Owen’s poems, Parable of the Old Man and the Young. Like Vaughan Williams, Britten borrows from himself, as he had written this movement as a small work in 1952 entitled, Canticle II, Abraham and Isaac, Op. 52, and incorporated it here in his Requiem. Britten introduces the movement simply and innocently with the Boy’s choir with organ to the text, “Domine Jesu Christe,” an “invocation of God’s promise to lead Abraham and his seed into holy light.” This evolves into a section with the choir on the text “Quam olim Abrahae promisisti,” a text associated with the promise given to Abraham and all of his seed for salvation, at his willingness to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, at the
request of God.

This Latin text, when incorporated in a Requiem, is often set in counterpoint, as independent, layered motives represent Abraham's seeds multiplied from generation to generation (Mozart's Requiem, for example). Britten uses an upbeat tempo and dance-like rhythm here, in a seemingly joyous section. This movement seems out of place when compared with the rest of this work; issues of war seem to be set aside for a moment of celebration. Britten’s cynicism becomes apparent when his music is placed against the poetry of Owen. Continuing the rhythmic motives and upbeat rhythmic drive, but set now for soloists and chamber orchestra, the Owen’s poetry gives deep irony to the Latin text and points to the author’s bitter attitude toward the authors of war. In connecting the two texts musically, Britten begins the soloist’s line, “So Abram rose, and clave the wood,” to the same ascending melody as he set for Quam Olim Abrahae. The story ensues in Owens’ writing, as Angels inform the Old man that he may now free his son. The male soloists shift roles here to those of the Angels, intoning chant-like parallel fourths, creating an unworldly, ethereal nature. The Old man, being granted permission to free his son, refuses to do so and slays his son anyway. In mocking the Requiem text and previous music, he “Slew half the Seed of Europe, one by one,” Britten again uses counterpoint and layered lines, now indicating they will be slain rather than saved, which clearly was a choice. Britten pointedly uses a musical motive to accomplish this; the contrapuntal lines given to soloists here are set in inversion from the choruses' Quam Olim Abrahae, as the same melody is found descending imitatively in the soloists’ voices, where before they set were in ascending form in the choir. When the choir returns with the Latin text and theme from Quam Olim it is now set to an inverted melody linked with Owen's text, linking the two, returning to ascending lines as at the beginning. Adding to the cynicism, Britten simultaneously places the boys’ choir and organ to the text “Hostias et preces,” (Sacrifice and prayers we offer you), indicating the sacrifice of future generations through the boys' voices. This is a clear demonstration of anger and bitterness from poet and composer alike, at the authorities who make war, who needlessly and willfully sacrifice generations of tomorrow. Example 12A shows the opening motive for “Quam Olim Abrahae,” 12B shows the inverted motive for the soloists, coupled with the boys’ choir singing the “Hostias.”

Example 12A: Benjamin Britten: War Requiem, Vocal Score, p.77
Example 12B: Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Vocal Score, p. 91

The *Sanctus* ensues, the fourth full movement of the work. It seems out of character at first, upbeat and victorious, with optimistic and noble brass fanfares and choral climaxes, reminiscent of a Palm Sunday triumphal procession. Like the Passion story, however, this procession is tainted with the knowledge of what is to come; the impending warnings of the sacrifice and suffering yet to come; this victory parade is premature and misguided. Such a parallel can easily be drawn in this Requiem. A remarkable contrapuntal technique takes place at the opening of this movement, as the chorus freely chants the text: *pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua* (Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory), building musical pyramids in freely chanted rhythms, creating a texture that literally depicts the heaven and earth being filled with glory (example 13).
Example 13: Benjamin Britten: War Requiem, p. 142

As we've come to expect in this work, a poem of Owen’s now makes an appearance. Laden with vocal line text painting and orchestral depiction typical of the solo writing we have seen thus far, The End paints a very different picture for us than a victory parade. Filled with images of “a blast of lightning from the East,” and “loud clouds,” the text seems to challenge the very principles of the Easter story itself; resurrection is questioned. The movement opens with the Latin text set to percussion including antique cymbals and tubular bells (a Far-Eastern-like sound), while the upcoming Owen’s text references “The East,” “…which may have suggested to Britten the idea of opening the Sanctus with music of a distinctly Far Eastern flavor.” The question, “Shall life renew these bodies?” presents a dire challenge to a Requiem Mass, the purpose and intent of its use in the Christian church, and challenges the central tenet to the Christian religion itself. The soloist begs answers to these questions, “Mine ancient scars Shall not be glorified, Nor my titanic tears, the Sea, be dried,” Britten's music becomes increasingly sparse, melodies descending in contour and range, the orchestral ending set in low strings and harp to the text “…nor my titanic tears, the sea, be dried,” all hope is indeed lost. This may be the lowest moment of this work if there is indeed no hope; no God to save us; no resurrection; then all is futile. The musical depiction is as telling as Owen’s words are fierce; the reader will recall this is all set in the same movement as the Sanctus, directly against the text and exuberant music of that triumphal procession and fanfare.

The next movement, Agnus Dei, is a microcosm of Britten’s symbiotic style and philosophy throughout this work. The movement begins with an ostinatto in the strings that is consists of successive measures of descending B--Minor scale followed by ascending C—Major, scale. The beginning of each scalar section are a tritone apart- F# vs. C natural- the same interval and exact pitches as the tritone which unifies this piece (used in the boys' voices repeatedly). The use of asymmetrical meter (5/8), like the use of 7/4 for Dies Irae, is reserved by Britten for the more painful or dramatic portions of the score, as in the progression to the cross represented in the Agnus Dei. The Agnus Dei is described below; the pain, anguish, and ordeal of a march to the cross is heard and felt in this harmonic progression coupled with the tritone melody (example 14).
The text for the *Agnus Dei* represents the sacrificial Lamb, Christ on his path to Golgatha, to the cross to be "sacrificed." Britten begins this section with a unison passage for the strings in 5/8 meter, linear and lyric, smooth and haunting, as a somber dirge or slowly moving procession is occurring. Unlike the other movements set in Latin and entitled accordingly (*Agnus Dei*, for example), this one begins with the voice of Wilfred Owen: "One ever hangs where shelled roads part. In this war he too lost a limb" (*At a Calvary Near the Ancre*), and the melody for the tenor outlines the triton, yet again. The choice of this poem, set against the procession to the cross and the use of the word “hangs,” are intriguing. The chorus answers Owen with repeated lines of *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi* (Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,) joining the unison lines of the strings. Here, Owen invokes name of Christ, and even references the march to Golgatha. Owen actually places Christ on a modern battlefield, taking wounds for us. Owen is also chastising the patriots who would call for war while offering others for sacrifice, but not themselves ("The Scribes on all the people shove and bawl allegiance to the state, But they who love the greater love Lay down their life, they do not hate"). This section is reminiscent of Vaughan Williams’ work, as the choir repeats the text *Agnus Dei* alternating with text by Owen, weaving and overlapping one with the other. Britten uses a subtle variation of his "resignation chord" at the conclusion of the *Agnus Dei*, as the choir finishes on an F#--Major triad, one half step higher than before. Lest this be seen as a peaceful, serene culmination, even one of hope or peace, the tenor soloist, having sung exclusively poetry by Owen, now sings the Latin Requiem text, to an ascending line in a scale that references polytonality (more than one key simultaneously) singing: *Dona Nobis Pacem*, (grant us peace). His solo ends on the hallmark tritone that has marked this work from the beginning. Britten makes a critical text choice here, importing text from the *Roman Mass* into the ending of his Requiem; a traditional Requiem *Agnus Dei* does not conclude with the words *Dona Nobis Pacem* (grant us peace), but rather *Dona eis requiem sempiternam*, (grant them rest eternal). This change is significant when considering the overall nature of the work; Britten had no confidence that man was capable of peace, or that God would grant it.

The final movement of the Requiem, often found here in a Requiem Mass, but actually belonging to the Burial service instead (called the Absolution), concludes with thoughts of eternal death, rather than life and salvation. Slow, ponderous statements of percussion begin this movement, much like the beginning of the Introit, in a lengthy prelude to the conclusion of this work. This evolves musically with the text, *Libera Me*, (Deliver me, Oh Lord, from death eternal) as a fervent plea for hope and life after death. The surging, heaving rhythms aligned with attitudes of death earlier in this work return with simultaneous, repeated cries of deliverance, *Libera Me*, by the chorus. Britten’s melodic work again clearly joins text to music in this movement. The opening motive is set for soprano solo to quasi-Cambiata tones, set in three consecutive half steps and a whole step, stated first by the soloist then picked up in counterpoint by the choir. This section is developed for a while, set to escalating, repeated utterances of text without reprieve. There is more doubt than assurance that deliverance is forthcoming. The melodic pattern for the *Libera Me* is seen in example 16.

The soprano soloist speaks on our behalf, nervously proclaiming *Tremens, factus, sum ego*, (I am seized by trembling and fear) set to “trembling” strings on spiccato (bounced) bowings. The music below is illustrative of Britten’s dramatic, quasi-operatic writing for soprano soloist, reminiscent of Verdi’s soprano writing in his Requiem. One can feel her trembling as she intercedes on our behalf. The orchestra enhances the tension in ascending counterpoint, and the altos and basses of the choir enter responsively in intensely hushed tones (example 15).
Example 15: Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Vocal Score, pp. 141-142

This section escalates to an emphatic return of the *Dies Irae* text in the chorus set to descending themes and counterpoint; this is highly unusual in a Requiem setting; a return to the “Day of Wrath” at a time when reassurance and hope, peace and acceptance is yearned for, is telling of...
Britten’s attitude in this piece. Britten does not give us reason to hope, instead, this movement builds in layers, textures, themes, orchestration, and choral voicing to an apocalyptic peak. The chorus almost sounds like the throngs of people clamoring for God to save them, desperate, in panicked pleadings and shouts of agony and terror, rather than a people filled with faith and conviction, with assurance of salvation. This moment encapsulates Britten’s attitude toward war, toward a religion that would allow man, or even encourage man to engage in or justify war, and serves as a screaming plea for God to deliver us from ourselves. The text, *Libera Me*, is uttered time and time again without reprieve or break; developed over an extensive amount of time musically, which builds until it cannot be held back any longer. The orchestra and voices then fade away, as if dying voices of soldiers, the decaying residue of battle, or ultimate destruction and futility on a “field of glory,” or as the fading hopes of a people whose prayers have gone unfulfilled. The final quite reflective words are periodically whispered, *Libera me* and *Domine* (God). It is as if God has not answered and is not even listening. Example 16 shows the apocalyptic climax of this War Requiem, and the people’s unanswered pleading to God for deliverance.

Example 16: Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Vocal Score, p. 154
We segue from the *Libera Me* to another poem by Owen (*Strange Meeting*), picking up the text from the Latin (deliverance), referring to thoughts of “escape”: “It seemed that out of battle I escaped down some profound dull tunnel…” once again relating these two text sources. This is set to sustained, eerie string writing, with free, recitative-like tenor solos, in dream-like character. Again, in Brittenesque symbiotic style, the first four notes set for the tenor solo, are the exact intervals of the theme used for *Libera Me*, as the soloist sings “It seemed that out of battle.” Compare the theme below (example 17), to the *Libera Me* theme seen above (example 16). The connection is more than haunting, as the soldier thinks he has been delivered from battle.

![Example 17: Benjamin Britten: War Requiem, p. 157, Vocal Score](image)

The tenor soloist here takes on the thoughts of a soldier on the battlefield at the end of the day, while the baritone soloist becomes the voice of a German soldier. This dream-line encounter, seemingly through the moonlit mist of a battlefield, sets the soloists in stark transparency with thinly veiled orchestration; as if the very souls of the soldiers were speaking to one another without benefit of or hindered by physical bodies. The music coupled with the text, embodied in melodic direction, rhythmic fragments, thin orchestration, and suspended harmonic color paint an eerie, macabre picture. The now established tritone makes its appearance in the melody of the tenor soloist to the words, *Strange friend*. Then, speaking as if for all who have died in vain, this section evolves as a macabre duet who ultimately recognize one another as former enemies, and the irrelevance of that now. The orchestration continues to thicken, ebbing and falling in support of this dance of death until the metaphoric text, "Let us sleep now" intertwines, and the boys’ choir and organ join them with the text *In Paradisum*, (May the Angels lead you to paradise). This is a text not contained in a traditional Latin Requiem, but sometimes is included by composers such as Gabriel Faure. There is a sense of acceptance or resignation, as the boys spin out a long, lyric melody of ethereal beauty.

The choir adopts this theme, musical key, and text (*In Paradisum*), layered on top of the duet of the soldiers (Let us sleep now), sung simultaneously. Combining the texts from the Latin Requiem with the English poetry of Owen is a rarity in this work, reserved until now. Here, all the performance entities are combined in the same music, key, and melodic fabric, with these two texts. The boys continue with the Latin text while the orchestra adopts the descending melodies of the duet (Let us sleep now) in counterpoint, becoming a personal Requiem for all who have fallen. Finally, the soprano soloist floats above everyone on the Latin text as if ascending into the heavens, *Chorus Angelorum suscipiet* (May a choir of Angels welcome you). The ascending soprano voice provides instant text-painting for this moment. The sounds of the bells and boys’ choir, symbols and sounds of the church and of purity are tainted once again as the tritone appears in both. The polytextual ending and mixture of musical motives continues right up to the final...
seven measures, the only movement to do this. Example 18 shows the conclusion of this work, bringing all of these forces together as described above.

Example 18: Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Vocal Score, pp. 176-177

The chorus finishes the work A Cappella, similar to the end of the *Kyrie* (example 9), to the text *Requiescant in pace* (rest in peace), *Amen.* Britten includes a text from the Requiem to conclude his work, but does not grant us assurance of life everlasting. The traditional text found would be *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis,* (Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them,) indicating eternal salvation. Britten instead grants a prayer for peace one last time with the text he substitutes here. He concludes this mammoth, complex work with a simple, F--Major triad on unaccompanied choir. The ending provides us with a complete major triad, unlike Vaughan Williams' work, leaving the listener unsettled or perhaps grieving. Is this F--Major triad a mockery of peace? Is it resignation? Is it irony? Given the complexities of this score and the enormity of performing forces, it is decidedly a musical statement to conclude so simply and transparently as to leave the audience reflective and silent, as if in reverence to the dead or questioning the future.

Britten’s convictions against war comes across clearly and with tremendous impact. The
The continuous interweaving of texts from Owens and the *Requiem Mass* is pointed, deeply disturbing, and leaves an indelible mark upon the listener. These texts, intertwined, overlapped, alternated, juxtaposed, mirroring and commenting upon one another would be allegory enough, perhaps. Joined with musical elements that augment and underscore the text, this work triggers levels of emotions in the listener unparalleled in a musical work, and makes the atrocities of war most personal and direct. The tritone seems to say it all; war does not resolve issues for humanity. In music, the tritone becomes the metaphor for this, as it does not "resolve" to consonance either. It is certainly ironic that the place for which this piece was written, St. Michael's Cathedral, became a symbol of reconciliation and hope; but Britten's *Requiem* leaves us with no such assurance.

**Conclusion**

This study has focused on two major choral-orchestral offerings to the musical world against war. Both of these composers are major contributors to the world of music, and each work represents a capstone of their careers. Each composer, each work, has withstood the test of time, been performed to critical acclaim, and was intended as a commentary to better society and the world as a result of its composition and performance. Each composer used musical textures to color text in clear and emphatic ways, sometimes with commonality, sometimes with illuminating differences. Regardless of these similarities or contrasts, the compositional goals were similar; select a text that has to do with war, society, and religion, illumine that text with music in such a way as to draw the listener into the text, to reveal the text or even comment upon it.

The real personal gain is to know these works; to allow oneself to be affected by them; to examine them over and over, absorbing the music and text, letting one’s very soul be affected by their contents and intentions. Art has a way to reflect society and life, certainly; but also perhaps to alter it by bringing it into the light. Perhaps the Ancient Greeks were right after all- perhaps music CAN affect change in persons and, correspondingly, in society. The works in this study concentrate on bringing the tragedy and horrors of war into collective consciousness in hopes that it might be avoided, condemned and denounced. The music helps to deliver this message emotionally and psychologically; driving home the message into the depth of the listener, in ways not possible with text alone. The works were intended to make war intensely personal and emotional, more than something merely political, by bringing the ramifications of war into the light, penetrating our very beings as only music can do. This powerful music set to these texts in this fashion has affected this author in the process of creating this paper, deepening and polarizing convictions against war. It is hoped that it will do the same for others.

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**Bibliography:**


