Joshua Ballance, King's

Benjamin Britten's War Requiem in the Cold War[1]

The very title of Britten's *War Requiem* suggests the possibility of political awareness, and given the context of its composition in the early 1960s, the height of the Cold War, the intersection of the work with contemporary politics is of major significance (see Fig.1). This essay assesses *War Requiem* from two perspectives: Britten's rhetorical intentions for the work, and contemporary reception during the 1960s. In particular, it will explore the degree to which Britten attempted to comment on contemporary events, most obviously nuclear tensions, and to what extent its reception considered the work in this light. The only major scholarly work on its reception has been that of Cooke, though this focusses more on its success, with little interrogation of context.[2] The present essay is historical rather than analytical: the major sources are Britten's words rather than the aesthetic detail of *War Requiem*. This essay takes two angles on the Cold War: the localised historical context of the early 1960s; and the broader historiographical trends shaped by Cold War politics, particularly in the light of the revisionist interrogation of ideas of aesthetic value that were foregrounded in the West.[3] Historical perception of these values must be qualified by Britten's place in the 'middle-brow', however.[4] Indeed, he was aware of the Western fetish for novelty, and deliberately rejected this.[5] This self-reflexivity

Fig. 1: Timeline

Date	Event
October 1958	Accepts commission.
1961	Major compositional work takes place.
April, 1961	Bay of Pigs Invasion.
December, 1961	*War Requiem* completed.
30 May, 1962	World Premiere in Coventry.
October, 1962	Cuban Missile Crisis.
23 October, 1963	US Premiere.
March, 1964	'Incomplete' USSR Premiere.
23 May, 1966	Complete USSR Premiere.

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[2] Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 78-107.

[3] See Peter J. Schmelz, 'Introduction: Music in the Cold War', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring 2009), 3–16.

[4] Christopher Chowrimootoo, 'The Timely Traditions of *Albert Herring*', *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Autumn 2011), 379-419.

[5] Benjamin Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award* (31.7.1964), http://www.aspenmusicfestival.com/benjamin-britten, accessed 3.4.19.

positions him in a subtly different position to the conventional West-East dichotomy that has been typical even of much revisionist analysis.[6] Though he fitted into broad Western cultural ideas about the rejection of specific, perceptible social ideology in a work, he abhorred the demand for "the latest avant-garde tricks."[7] These values shaped both his intentions for, and the early reception of *War Requiem*, and so historiographical awareness is a crucial part of this essay.

Making people think?

It has been widely recognised that Britten sought to make a statement with *War Requiem.* Indeed, in his Aspen Award Speech, awarded largely as a response to the work, he argued that "it is the composer's duty […] to speak to or for his fellow human beings".[8] Nonetheless, precisely what Britten sought to say in *War Requiem* is rather less clear.

The nature of the commission, in the artistic festival surrounding the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral, explicitly linked the work to World War II. Britten emphasised this with the dedication of the work, which was originally "In commemoration of all the fellow sufferers of the Second World War",[9] and named several friends who had died in or due to the Second World War. Although he later removed the initial dedication, describing it as "a bit too particular"[10], the names remain. The libretto opened up the field of reference to include World War I, however. The choice was entirely Britten's: the commission suggested that "its libretto could be sacred or secular".[11] Going even further, Britten's revised dedication included an Owen quotation: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity… All a poet can do today is warn."[12]

Evidently Britten was referring specifically to both World Wars, and yet this prefacing quotation appears to move the work beyond the commemorative, and a more rhetorical plane. In a letter to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, he posited that *War Requiem* "may make people think a bit",[13] and to Princess Margaret of Hesse and the Rhine, that "one had hoped to do a little."[14] Whilst these are hardly bold statements, Britten's correspondence is typically reticent. Nonetheless, there is no mention in his letters of either the Bay of Pigs debacle or the Cuban Missile Crisis. Tony Judt has suggested that Cold War

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[6] E.g. Richard Taruskin, 'Afterword: Nicht blutbefleckt?', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2009), particularly 280.

[7] Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award*.

[8] Ibid.

[9] *Letters From a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976, Vol. Five*, ed. Philip Reed and Melvyn Cooke (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 326.

[10] Benjamin Britten to Alec Robertson, 11 February, 1962, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 380.

[11] John Lowe to Benjamin Britten, 7 October, 1958, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 73.

[12] Benjamin Britten, *War Requiem* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1962), i.

[13] Benjamin Britten to Peter Maxwell Davies, 18 November, 1963, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 523.

[14] Benjamin Britten to Princess Margaret of Hesse and the Rhine, 20 April, 1962, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 393.

nuclear politics was simply less of an issue in Europe than American-dominated historiography implies, so this may provide an explanation.[15] Britten certainly harboured anti-nuclear sentiments, however. In 1959, Pears and he contributed to a concert marking the end of Nuclear Disarmament Week; a year later, though he rejected an invitation to join the committee for 'civil disobedience against nuclear warfare', he described himself as "sympathetic to efforts to stop the present madness".[16] Given his famous identification as a pacifist, this is hardly surprising; indeed, Cooke views *War Requiem* as a "unique pacifist statement fully in keeping with the composer's lifelong hatred of the violence and destruction of warfare".[17] Nonetheless, whether this refers to the geopolitics of the Cold War is unclear.

Britten's intent can be further understood by considering his choice of solo performers for the premiere and first recording of the work. It is well known that alongside Peter Pears and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who sang in both, he sought to have Galina Vishnevskaya, and the intricacies of the narrative surrounding this are revealing. His letters demonstrate from an early stage a desire to have Fischer-Dieskau alongside Pears, and a clear awareness of the symbolic value of this.[18] He made no reference to Vishnevskaya this early, however. In fact, it was not until July 1961 that he finally heard her sing, after which he engaged her to perform in the work.[19] As such, whilst the Anglo-German plane of the performance had been crucial from the start, Soviet inclusion was a later addition. The precise chronology of these decisions has been somewhat distorted, in part due to Britten himself. In his ill-fated attempts to secure Vishnevskaya for the premiere, he hyperbolically (if understandably) posited that "the dominating soprano part has been planned from the start for Madame Vishnevskaya."[20] This is a view that Vishnevskaya herself repeated, despite the chronological inaccuracy.[21] Nonetheless, it is plausible that his rhetorical intentions for the work evolved across time. When he wrote to Ekaterina Furtseva, the Soviet Culture Minister, concerning the premiere recording of the work, he argued that Vishnevskaya's inclusion was "important both musically and socially because [...] it is an urgent cry for peace."[22] Indeed, he described the intention of the work as "to promote human understanding through music between our Nations."[23] This ambition is lent gravity by

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[15] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 8.

[16] Benjamin Britten to Reverend Michael Scott, 2 October, 1960, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 267.

[17] Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem*, 1.

[18] Benjamin Britten to John Lowe, 9 February, 1961, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 314.

[19] Benjamin Britten to John Lowe, 11 July, 1961, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 329.

[20] Benjamin Britten to Vladimir Stepanov, 14 December, 1961, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 370.

[21] See for example 'Interview with Galina Vishnevskaya', trans. Cameron Pyke, Galina Vishnevskaya Opera Centre, Moscow, 11 June, 2010 in Cameron Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016), 318.

[22] Benjamin Britten to Ekaterina Furtseva, 5 September, 1962, in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 424.

[23] Benjamin Britten to Vladimir Popov, Ministry of Culture, Monday 5th June [1962?], letter in Britten-Pears Archive.

Britten's various visits to the USSR, including four after 1961. Whittall argues that Britten even relished the logistical difficulties presented by working with Soviet artists, though it seems as likely that he sought political change.[24] Wiebe has similarly highlighted Britten's commitment to cultural exchange, made explicit in a letter that he and Pears wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* in 1956 arguing for increasing such activity.[25] As such, Britten appears to have hoped not only to produce a spirit of reconciliation between England and Germany, but also some sort of rapprochement with the USSR.

What did they think?

Having outlined Britten's intentions for *War Requiem*, the other side of this essay considers how it was received. The primary sources for this assessment are the programmes that accompanied its early performances and contemporary press reviews. There were two principal trends in the work's early reception: either to ignore any political dimension to the work, or to frame it as fundamentally commemorative of the two World Wars. Fig. 2 presents a list of those press reviews consulted, whilst Fig. 3 shows the programme books.[26] In each case, each item is categorised according to the broad perspective it presents—although this might appear reductive, most texts offer a clear viewpoint.

As can be seen, the two trends identified above comprise the majority of entries. Whilst the apolitical reviews sometimes just focus on aspects of the performance—for example the *Times* review from 13 December, 1963—as has been noted, it is often the case that contextualisation goes only so far as to provide background about Owen. Those sources categorised as commemorative are more varied, though there are some common themes: particularly the nature of the Coventry commission, and more detailed commentary on Owen. As indicated in Figs. 2 & 3, there are some outliers, however: those reviews which have a more pacifist focus, or in a few cases, present a case for the work's contemporary relevance.

Framing the work as generally pacifist is hardly surprising, given Britten's well-known pacifist inclinations. It is described several times as an 'antiwar Requiem', such as in Grilli's *Japan Times* review, or the *Neues Deutschland* review ('ein Antikriegsrequiem'), both of 1965. A pacifist angle also appears in broad statements about its contemporary relevance. The programme book for the 1967 performance at Ieper, commemorating the Battle of Ieper, describes it as "a message of reconciliation and peace for all generations"; similarly, the programme book for the 1963 Wiener Konzerthausgesellschaft performance frames it as relevant to "the horrors of the most recent past, the madness of the war in

[24] Arnold Whittall, 'Britten's Rhetoric of Resistance' in *Rethinking Britten*, ed. Philip Rupprecht (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 184-185.

[25] Heather Wiebe, 'Curlew River and Cultural Encounter' in *Rethinking Britten*, ed. Rupprecht, 163-164.

[26] These are reviews & programme books in the Britten-Pears Archive, supplemented by online archives. If marked 'unclear', the archive lacks the reference; if marked 'anon.' the text does not give the author. Those publications marked * are from a document labelled 'Summary of "The 1963 Decca Recording of War Requiem in the Dutch Press"'—both author and date are unclear, although it was apparently received 'from Holland'.

Fig. 2: Press Reviews

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Perspective	Publication	Date	Author
Apolitical	*The Times*	11.1.1963	Anon.
	The Sunday Times	13.1.1963	Desmond Shawe-Taylor
	Mus. & Mus.	February, 1963	Jeremy Noble
	Granta (Cambridge University)	11.5.1963	Derek Bourgeois
	The Times	13.12.1963	Anon.
	**De Tijd*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	**Delftsche Courant*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	**De Stem*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	Unclear	16.4.1964	Unclear
	Unclear	8.8.1964	Peter Stadlen
Apolitical (but mentions Owen)	*Time and Tide*	7.6.1962	Peter Shaffer
	Schleswiger Nachrichten (reprinted in at least a dozen German newspapers)	20.11.1962	Anon.
	The Sunday Times	9.12.1962	Desmond Shawe-Taylor
	San Francisco Chronicle	8.12.1964	Dean Wallace
	The Washington Post	29.5.1964	Paul Hume
	Asahi Evening News	24.2.1965	Ernst Gottschalk
Commemorative	*The Times*	25.5.1962	Anon.
	The New York Times	24.10.1963	Ross Parmenter
	Daily Mail	3.8.1964	Unclear
	Unclear	16.2.1965	Leo Berg
	Unclear	Unclear	Imogen Holst
Commemorative /Pacifist	*The Washington Post*	24.5.1964	Paul Hume
	Neues Deutschland	16.2.1965	H. J. S.
Pacifist	*The New York Times*	16.6.1963	Raymond Ericson
	The New York Times	29.7.1963	Harold C. Schoenberg
	**Alg. Handelsblad*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	**Vrij Nederland*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	Berliner Zeitung	16.2.1965	H. B.
	Sächs Neuste Nachrichten	17.2.1965	Unclear
	Unclear	18.2.1965	Unclear
	The Japan Times	1.3.1965	Marcel Grilli
Contemporary	*Approach: A Literary Quarterly*, No. 50	Winter, 1964	Albert Fowler
	Radio Times	29.11.1963	Donald Mitchell
	**Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	**De Groene Amsterdammer*	Post-1963 Recording	Unclear
	Вопросы теории и эстетики музыки	1967	G. Orlov

Fig. 3: Programme Books

Perspective	Location	Date
Apolitical	Berlin Konzertsaal der Hochschule für Musik	19.11.1962
	Wiener Musikvereinssaal	25.10.1964
	BBC Radio for Schools: Talks for Sixth Forms (Broadcast)	Spring Term 1965
Apolitical (but mentions Wilfred Owen)	Westminster Abbey	6.12.1962
	LP Release	1963
	University of Minnesota	4.12.1964
Commemorative	Royal Albert Hall (Proms)	9.1.1963
	Salisbury Cathedral, Winter Gardens Bournemouth, Exeter Cathedral, Winchester Cathedral	4/5/6.5.1966
Commemorative/ Pacifist	Coventry Cathedral	25.5-17.6.1962
	Wiener Konzerthausgesellschaft	9.6.1963
	Tokyo Bunka Kaikan	22/23/24.2.1965
	St.-Maartenskathedraal, Ieper	4.11.1967
	Ottobeuren	6.9.1964

general, but also a more peaceful present".[27] Returning to the Coventry premiere, in the Festival programme book the Lord Bishop of Coventry proposed that the concerts express "the hope that together the nations of the world may find their way through to a mutual understanding and lasting peace." Whilst these present the work as having some relevance to contemporary society, they hardly constitute a full-throated cry for pacifism, instead appealing to a more palatable generalised condemnation of war. These broader statements thus avoided linking the work specifically to contemporary events, relying instead on a broader, more bland appeal for peace.

Though this might seem like a harsh reading, comparing them to the 'Contemporary' texts makes the point explicitly. Fowler's 1964 piece argues that the inclusion of Vishnevskaya "points up the confrontation of East and West and warns against […] a Third World War fought with hydrogen bombs and missiles". Rather less stridently, Mitchell's 1963 article suggests that "The weight of Britten's warning has […] been intensified in these months", and the two Dutch reviews refer to contemporary tensions. Fowler's piece is exceptionally explicit, though *Approach*'s Quaker sponsorship somewhat explains this.[28] The other article that frames *War Requiem* as having contemporary relevance is Orlov's 1967 piece, in which he seeks to explain why it was "consonant with our listeners."[29] This

[27] "den Schrecken der jüngsten Vergangenheit, zum Wahnsinn des Krieges überhaupt, aber auch zur friedlicheren Gegenwart" (my translation).

[28] Obituary of Albert Vann Fowler & Helen Wose Fowler, 19.12.1968, *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), 46.

[29] "по смыслу оказалось созвучным нашим слушателям." (my translation)

Soviet perspective helpfully puts the Western critics into relief. A significant part of his argument links the work back to the devastation suffered by the USSR in World War II, but he also presents Britten, and Owen, as espousing a universal humanism that unites contemporary people in a society 'divided territorially and ideologically'. That the two texts most explicitly contextualising the work as linked to modern-day events are outside the Western mainstream sheds light on the main thrust of Western critical reception as avoiding specifically mentioning contemporary events, instead viewing the work as commemorative, or making broad claims about pacifism, if not ignoring politics altogether.

The other useful perspective provided on *War Requiem* is that surrounding the intransigence of the Soviet Union on allowing Vishnevskaya's performance in the premiere, despite then permitting her inclusion in the recording. The sources suggest various explanations for this. John Lowe speculated that the issue might be the work's Christianity, or that it was deemed problematic for her to be on stage as part of a "British-West German-Russian cast".[30] Vishnevskaya's autobiography supports the latter of these interpretations: she describes Ekaterina Furtseva asking, "how can you, a Soviet woman, stand next to a German and an Englishman and perform a political work?". Communication between Victor Stepanov and Rostropovich, also cited in the autobiography, suggests that Furtseva found the German restoration of Coventry Cathedral inappropriate, and felt that the building should have been left as a ruin.[31] It is naturally impossible to ascertain the veracity of these statements, and there is no reason to suggest that any of these actors may have been expressing the realities of the situation. Vishnevskaya's chronological waywardness has already been mentioned above; this author can find no evidence that there was German financing for Coventry Cathedral—indeed, Germany paid the UK no financial reparations following World War II. Nonetheless, the decision of the Soviet Union to forbid her participation (particularly as she was already in the UK, performing *Aida* at Covent Garden) indicates the perceived political ramifications of the work in the USSR.

Why did they think it?

In order to explain these trends, this essay concludes by contextualising these tendencies in relation to Western values surrounding the role of art. The typical revisionist view is that expressed by Taruskin, when he states that Carter and Khrennikov "both produced works that defined a standard of orthodoxy—of exemplary values given a model realization—within their respective milieux".[32] Taruskin successfully exposes the significant ideological underpinning of the aesthetic values promulgated by the Western high modernists, perhaps best summarised as a thirst for abstraction that supposedly divorced a successful work from any social context, justified solely according to its inherent

[30] John Lowe to Benjamin Britten, 11th December, 1961, letter in Britten-Pears Archive.

[31] Galina Vishnevskaya, *Galina: a Russian Story* (Boston: Harcourt Publishers, 1985), 368, reprinted in *Letters From a Life*, ed. Reed & Cooke, 371-2.

[32] Taruskin, 'Nicht blutbefleckt?', 280.

formal procedures. This sheds light on the most critical comments about *War Requiem*, which came from Stravinsky, the arch-modernist; indeed, when *Themes and Conclusions* was published in the UK, his comments had to be realigned from critiquing the piece to commenting on its heroic reception.[33] This fundamentalism was certainly the extreme in the West, and was actively rejected by Britten in his critique of 'Foundation Music'.[34] And yet, it can be understood as influencing even those who foreswore its more extreme ends, operating within the 'middlebrow', or the 'moderate mainstream', as Whittall puts it. Indeed, Whittall points out that whilst Western critics were happy to link cultural events to contemporary politics, there remained significant resistance to doing the same to musical works.[35]

With this contextual framework in place, it is hardly surprising that Western critics sought to avoid linking *War Requiem* to the machinations of contemporary politics (and leftwing writers like Fowler and Orlov did the opposite). Likewise, in his rhetorical statement, Britten appears actively to have avoided too overt a condemnation. Evans has suggested that Britten provided this critique in the context of the "distance and shelter of religious ritual"; Whittall that Britten's resistance was "more covert than confrontational".[36] Both of these are legitimate ways of interpreting *War Requiem*—whilst he certainly expressed a pacifist outlook, the commemorative context of the piece avoided this being linked too specifically to contemporary events. That this was an interpretative option is evidenced by the critical response which, as has been shown, latched on to this interpretation, avoiding possible interpretations of modern-day relevance in favour of broader assertions of a general, inoffensive hope for peace.

To conclude, a final anecdote. On the 70th anniversary of Britten's birth, Pears and the other executors of Britten's estate donated £10, 000 from the estate to the United Nations, the Save the Children Fund, and the Peace Pledge Union, Britain's oldest secular pacifist organisation. The announcement of this donation (see Fig. 4) posits that Britten would have approved, "especially at a time when the threat of nuclear extinction and countless acts of carnage and violence are part of everyday life." They suggest that, due to the modern climate, this donation was made "in the spirit of peace and reconciliation of which War Requiem is an embodiment".[37] Britten certainly seems to have viewed *War Requiem* in this light too.

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[33] Mervyn Cooke, 'Reflections on and around Britten's War Requiem at Yale', adapted from the Tangeman Lecture delivered 28th April, 2007, https://ism.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Reflections%20on%20and%20around%20Britten's%20War%20Requiem%20at%20Yale.pdf, accessed 3.4.19.

[34] Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award*.

[35] Arnold Whittall, 'Individualism and accessibility: the moderate mainstream, 1945-75', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook & Anthony Pople (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 380.

[36] John Evans, '*Owen Wingrave*: A Case for Pacifism', in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), 231.

[37] Message from Sir Peter Pears and His Fellow Executors [Isador Caplan and Donald Mitchell], 19 November, 1983, in Britten-Pears Archive.

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