

## Reflections on and around Britten's War Requiem at Yale

Mervyn Cooke

*Adapted from the Tangeman Lecture delivered April 28, 2007*

On 28 April 2007 a magnificent performance of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was given in Woolsey Hall, New Haven, by the Philharmonia Orchestra of Yale under the conductor Shinik Hahm, with Sara Jakubiak, James Taylor, and Detlef Roth the soprano, tenor, and baritone soloists, the Yale Schola Cantorum, Yale Camerata, Yale Glee Club, Trinity Church Boys' and Girls' Choirs, and Elm City Girls' Choir; the performance had been given by the same forces at Boston's Symphony Hall on the previous day. Before the Yale concert it was my privilege to offer some thoughts on Britten's work in the shape of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music's annual Tangeman Lecture. Our discussion focused not only on Britten's economical and highly communicative musical idiom, but also on the various levels of irony presented by this multi-layered and thought-provoking score, which brings together – often in direct and disquieting collisions – vernacular settings of anti-war texts by the First World War poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), delivered in English by solo tenor and baritone voices with chamber-orchestral accompaniment, and the Latin *Missa pro defunctis*, declaimed by an operatic soprano soloist, large choir, and full orchestra; these together provide a more conventional backdrop sometimes reminiscent of the operatic style of Giuseppe Verdi. Britten's work had been commissioned in the late 1950s to mark the consecration of the modern cathedral built at Coventry (in the British county of Warwickshire), the city's old cathedral having been destroyed by German bombing in November 1940; his score was first performed in the new building, designed by the architect Basil Spence and poignantly erected alongside the ruins of the medieval building it replaced, on 30 May 1962.

In the present essay, rather than rehearse details of the work's structure and musico-textual content which are well known and readily accessible in published form,<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer a few reflections on the *War Requiem*, both from a personal perspective and in order to shed some light on Britten's general attitudes towards church music and universities during the period in which the work was composed. Two other Britten compositions will prove to be of relevance in exploring these contexts: his *Missa Brevis in D*, Op. 63, for boys' voices and organ (1959), in which he explored ways of writing for children that would be directly echoed in the music for boys' choir in the *War Requiem*, and his *Cantata Academica, Carmen Basiliense*, Op. 62, commissioned by the University of Basle in 1958 and first performed there in 1960.

Elsewhere I have noted how performances of the *War Requiem* so frequently take place in emotive public circumstances that it is often exceptionally difficult to maintain a degree of critical objectivity towards the piece, all the more so on account of the sometimes harrowing imagery in Owen's poetry and the unimpeachable nature of the work's central pacifist message.<sup>2</sup> The trend for performing the work on military anniversaries started in 1964 when Britten and Meredith Davies jointly conducted it at a BBC Promenade Concert in London's Royal Albert Hall; the performance was timed to commence at 8 p.m. on 8 August – precisely fifty years to the minute after Britain declared war on Germany in 1914. (This concert was the first to sell out in that year's Proms season.) The work's German premiere had already taken place on Armistice Day 1962, at the hands of the Berlin Philharmonic under Colin Davis. Later evocative performances in Germany included two held in cities that had been devastated by Allied attacks during the Second World War: Münster (1964) and Dresden (1965). As at Coventry, the

cathedral at Münster had been destroyed by bombing; Dresden had suffered an appalling degree of destruction in a massive air raid on 13 February 1945, in which some thirty-five thousand innocent civilians had been killed. The *War Requiem* performance in that city was scheduled to coincide exactly with the twentieth anniversary of an event that was not only one of the most controversial aerial bombardments in history, but one that directly led to the branding of British and Americans as terrorists. Later notable anniversary-oriented performances included two in May 1991: one was held at the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens in order to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Operation Mercury, the bloody invasion of Crete by Nazi paratroopers, and the other in Jerusalem to mark the ceasefire then current in the troubled region. On the latter occasion, it was related how at an earlier performance of the score an Israeli soldier had broken down because “until he heard Owen’s words to Britten’s music he had been unable to share his experience with anyone.”<sup>3</sup>

In the United Kingdom the *War Requiem* has for many years been routinely performed on or around Remembrance Sunday – the Sunday in November closest to 11 November (Veterans’ Day in the United States), the date in 1918 on which the Armistice concluding the First World War was signed. As with other major military anniversaries, these occasions can be an unsettling mixture of compassionate remembrance, patriotism, and guilt. It is interesting to speculate as to whether Britten’s composition of the *War Requiem* was to some degree a personal act of expiation from the pen of a committed pacifist who had refused to fight in the Second World War on the grounds of conscientious objection: guilt is generally considered to be a common enough feeling amongst those not involved in the fighting undertaken by their contemporaries (Owen’s friend and mentor Siegfried Sassoon wrote an evocative poem about it during a period of convalescence),<sup>4</sup> and Britten’s score is explicitly dedicated to the memory of four deceased friends, three of whom were killed in the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Britten certainly had no interest in patriotism, a topic of conversation which (as Robert Graves tells us) was ruthlessly stamped out by soldiers serving in the trenches; religion was also a strictly taboo subject at the front line in the First World War,<sup>6</sup> and the *War Requiem* implies much about the deficiencies of organized religion and the platitudes of the liturgy when confronted with the obscene inhumanity of the battlefield. Britten would undoubtedly have been somewhat uneasy to know that his score has frequently been presented as part of carefully stage-managed patriotic remembrances: indeed, the expectations attendant upon this kind of performance setting are so strong that when I conducted the work myself in Mansfield, England, with a student orchestra from the University of Nottingham on Remembrance Sunday in 1998, I afterwards received a rather stern letter from an elderly member of the audience expressing regret that we had not prefaced the concert with a rousing performance of the British national anthem.

The paradoxes of highly charged military anniversaries aside, my own attitude towards the *War Requiem* has always been conditioned by an enduring personal memory of the very first time I heard it – literally a life-changing moment, since this was one of the seminal early encounters with Britten’s music that determined me on the course of researching and publishing in the field of Britten studies that has remained a central part of my academic career. The occasion was the live TV broadcast of a performance of the piece from the Royal Albert Hall given (just four months before the composer’s death) as part of the BBC Promenade Concerts on 15 August 1976; it was conducted by Bernard Haitink, with Britten’s partner Peter Pears taking his customary pivotal role as tenor soloist. (The Albert Hall, one of Britten’s favored locations for performing the piece on account of its considerable acoustic and spatial potential, inevitably

conjures up a strong association with military anniversaries since this is the traditional venue for the Royal British Legion's annual Festival of Remembrance, which is always televised to a large popular audience, and which culminates in the solemn act of dropping thousands of poppies from the hall's impressive domed ceiling.) The *War Requiem* relay, which went out simultaneously on BBC 2 TV and BBC Radio 3, was considered to be the highlight of the entire week's broadcasting schedule, since it was boldly featured in the striking artwork by Owen Wood reproduced on the front cover of that week's edition of the *Radio Times* (the official TV-listing magazine, at that time published by the BBC: see fig. 1 on the accompanying CD). The issue included an article paraphrasing a recent interview with Pears, who recalled both "the stunned silence in which the audience all shuffled out from the first performance" and the fact that the baritone soloist at the premiere, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (a veteran conscript of the wartime Wehrmacht), had been moved to tears.<sup>7</sup>

At the time of this momentous 1976 broadcast I was a young teenager staying at my grandparents' bungalow, and I managed to persuade them to watch the relay. Only three television channels were then available, and no video recorder, so they had little alternative but to acquiesce; as they had no interest in modern music I am sure it required a good deal of well-intentioned effort on their part to go along with my suggestion. They sat through the performance in dutiful silence, my grandmother looking sternly matriarchal and somewhat disapproving, but my grandfather quietly moved. His reaction was the crucial memory that has stayed indelibly with me, because he was a veteran of the British Army who fought in the dreadful Battle of the Somme in 1916, losing an eye in the process. He never talked about his horrific experiences, and had he not always insisted on wearing neither a glass eye nor an eye patch I might have been none the wiser about his military background; to experience the *War Requiem* in his presence at a time when I was becoming equally preoccupied by Britten's music and Owen's poetry was uniquely meaningful.

One British reviewer at the time of the *War Requiem's* first performance went so far as to declare that to criticize it would be impertinent.<sup>8</sup> Given the self-evident genuineness and seriousness of the work's pacifist message and the highly charged performance environments outlined above, it came as something of a shock to me to discover in later life that several other commentators had been distinctly unpleasant about the piece. The cruelest and most famous was Igor Stravinsky, whose pungent comments – including the old cliché about the "Battle of Britten," the assertion that one should listen to the score with "Kleenex at the ready," and a comment that not agreeing with those who hailed the work as a masterpiece would be tantamount to failing to stand up for *God Save the Queen* – were considered so offensive to a British readership that they were toned down in the edition of his book published in the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> In Britain, the critical malaise that had threatened to surface at the time of Britten's opera for the Festival of Britain (*Billy Budd*, 1951) and did eventually break out into viperish nastiness when *Gloriana* – his opera to mark the coronation of Elizabeth II – badly flopped in 1953 was, on the admission of one of the critics involved, almost deliberately planned as an attack on a national figure who had enjoyed such an extraordinarily sustained string of compositional successes that it was felt high time he was taught a lesson and brought down a peg or two.<sup>10</sup> This attitude also colored the views of a number of academics and composers. At the University of Cambridge, where I studied during the 1980s, I was frankly amazed to encounter such a strong degree of prejudiced antipathy towards Britten's music on the part of certain senior faculty members who really should have known better; one of the best known

had in fact owed part of his early career advancement to Britten's patronage. It was rather extraordinary that embarking on doctoral research on the United Kingdom's most widely performed twentieth-century composer at one of the country's leading universities felt uncannily like sticking one's head out on the executioner's block.

Of course, Britten's meteoric rise to international fame with *Peter Grimes* (1945) and the constant high-profile promotion of his music by a major publisher (Boosey & Hawkes) and record company (Decca), had left many lesser compositional talents firmly in his shade, at the same time as he eloquently demonstrated that to espouse avant-garde techniques and atonality in order to make a significant mark as a contemporary composer was by no means necessary. Not only this: Britten's music achieved a not inconsiderable commercial success, and the *War Requiem* was a crucial (and, for the composer, not entirely comfortable) *cause célèbre* in this regard. Decca's gramophone recording of the work, issued in 1963 and conducted by the composer with his preferred choice of international soloists and the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, sold nearly two hundred and fifty thousand copies within five months of its release – an unheard of statistic for modern classical music at the time – and the handsomely produced boxed set topped many classical record charts abroad.

Since the memorable Yale performance of the *War Requiem*, the publication of Britten's voluminous correspondence has continued apace, with the fifth volume currently in preparation, and the sixth and final installment due for completion in time for the composer's centenary celebrations in 2013.<sup>11</sup> Two aspects of Britten's later career thrown up by work in progress on the forthcoming volumes are of particular interest in placing the *War Requiem* in the context of Britten's creative career during the period in which it was composed.

First, it seems that in the later 1950s Britten was much in demand for the composition of liturgical church music, though he rarely felt able to oblige. His modestly proportioned but vividly characterized *Missa Brevis* is a singular and notable exception: composed in 1959 for George Malcolm, director of music at London's Westminster Cathedral and a renowned keyboard player and trainer of boys' voices, this "Mass in Short Trousers" (as Britten liked to call it)<sup>12</sup> in some places inhabits a soundworld uncannily similar to that of the *War Requiem*; as with certain of Britten's other small-scale works – notably the series of Canticles for solo voices, piano, and various instruments, and the song-cycles *Serenade* and *Nocturne*, which reflect the technical preoccupations of specific Britten operas – one receives the impression that the piece may have served as a convenient study for a larger project. On the day after a performance at Westminster Cathedral on 4 January 1959 of Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942), for boys' voices and harp, the composer had written to Malcolm showing his sensitivity towards the qualities of individual young voices:

It was a wonderful evening for me, coming to the Cathedral last Sunday, & I hope I made it clear how deeply moved I was. If I dare to say it, I do think you & I together can do something to & for boys' voices which is pretty unique! How well the little red-haired boy sang, with a conviction that many of his elders lack; & I could hear enough of the senior boy in those few bars he sang to realise how much I was missing by his being ill. But it was more than the individuals, the whole choir sang with a brilliance & authority which was staggering.<sup>13</sup>

The first performance of the resulting *Missa Brevis* took place at a service of Capitular High Mass

at Westminster Cathedral on 22 July, under Malcolm's direction. On 28 July Britten wrote to Pears (who was on tour in Germany) to report that "I couldn't resist going up to London for the 2nd Mass performance [on 26 July], & was rewarded by a good performance, & also a sweet presentation by George & the choir of a lovely 'Liber Usualis,' all the Gregorian chants, signed by all of them!"

Given the somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the liturgy demonstrated by the *War Requiem*, which was composed less than a year later, it is interesting to observe Britten's concern that the first North American performance of the *Missa Brevis* (and its other overseas premieres) should be conducted as part of a church service and not given in a concert environment. In August 1958 Britten received details of a proposed United States premiere by the Boston College Humanities Series, evidently planned for concert conditions and using female voices, and he wrote to Ernst Roth at Boosey & Hawkes on 1 September:

I feel sure that the reason for the great impression that the *Missa Brevis* made last July was because it appeared in the right circumstances, in the right kind of way, and of course was a wonderful performance (as the B.B.C. tapes prove). With your approval I should like to make a condition that as far as possible the first performances of this work should be under the same circumstances, i.e. liturgical and not concert, and not by women's voices.

The first United States performance was instead given at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York by the combined forces of the cathedral's choir and those of St. Paul's Church (Westfield, New Jersey) and Grace Church (Newark) – a total of some one hundred fifty boys' voices. The cathedral's director of music, Alec Robertson, had written to the New York branch of Boosey & Hawkes on 19 November 1959 in order to outline his plans to perform the work the following January. On account of the brevity of the piece it was Robertson's intention to have it sung twice after Evensong, in place of a sermon, and to separate the two renditions with a performance of Britten's organ piece *Prelude and Fugue on a Theme of Vittoria* (1946). Robertson asked in his letter if Britten might consider composing "some simple fauxbourdons on plainsong tones for the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis" to make the occasion an "all Britten" event, noting the commercial potential for such an initiative amongst churches which are "fully aware of the contribution he has to make to church music, and who would give their eye teeth for something which could be sung in the Office of Morning or Evening Prayer from his pen." It appears that Britten did not adopt the suggestion.

The composer's attitude towards his *Missa Brevis* seemed a shade less serious when he readily acquiesced to an invitation from Ronald Duncan (who in 1946 had written the libretto for his opera *The Rape of Lucretia*, and whose scheme for an oratorio on the subject of Saint Peter<sup>14</sup> was later supplanted by the *War Requiem*) to send him a manuscript page for display on the wall of a coffee room which some friends of his were opening in Dean Street, off London's Shaftesbury Avenue; the venture had been "recklessly" financed by Virginia Maskell and Duncan himself.<sup>15</sup> Duncan's letter to Britten, dated 1 July 1959, explained that the venue was intended to "become a place where writers and artists meet. Presumably, they are wishing to replace the old Cafe Royal." Duncan felt that a Britten manuscript on the wall "would contribute a great deal to producing the kind of atmosphere they wish for," and the composer duly (and perhaps surprisingly) supplied a page of discarded sketches for the Kyrie of the *Missa Brevis*.<sup>16</sup> He had also sketched part of the work on a spare page at the back of his pocket diary for 1959: see figure 2. (Characteristically, the adult Britten always used Letts School-Boys Diary to record his

engagements: for further on his school-oriented mentality, see below.) The sketch shows him reworking a simple theme in D major into the florid melody at the start of the (partly twelve-note) Sanctus; the same diary page also includes a (vertical) fragment of one of the three trumpet parts in the contemporaneous *Fanfare for St Edmundsbury*, written for a pageant at the Suffolk town of Bury St Edmunds and first performed in the precincts of its cathedral in June 1959.

Apart from his “Mass in Short Trousers,” however, Britten turned down all but one of the many invitations he received asking him to compose liturgical music in the late 1950s. On 2 January 1959 he wrote to George Guest at St John’s College, Cambridge, to decline his invitation to write an evening service for Guest’s renowned chapel choir, giving as one of his reasons the fact that he had already “agreed to do a service for somewhere else [the *Missa Brevis*]; this, of course, is not what you want, but all the same might interest you, and as soon as it is done I will certainly let you see it.” Soon after, a new invitation to write a liturgical work came from Coventry Cathedral: Britten again declined the suggestion – this time a proposal that he compose a Mass for the cathedral’s new choir – in a letter to Canon Joseph W. Poole written on 28 February. (This possible commission appears to have been unrelated to the *War Requiem*, which Britten later wrote for the consecration of the cathedral in 1962.) And on 30 November, Alan Frank of Oxford University Press (which had been Britten’s first publisher for a brief period before he was signed up by Boosey & Hawkes in the 1930s) joined the ranks of those clamoring for new Britten church music:

Have you ever thought of completing a set of Services by adding to your TE DEUM [*Te Deum in C*, 1935] which we published? – that is to say, by making settings of the Communion Service and the Evening Service. Your TE DEUM is one of the very few settings which is entirely appropriate for its purpose, but which also has got bite and imagination to it, qualities which I am sure you will agree are woefully lacking in contemporary church music. Britten later responded to the suggestion not with a new Service but by completing his Morning Service; he composed a companion canticle, *Jubilate Deo* (also in C), for mixed chorus and organ, first performed in Leeds on 8 October 1961, and duly published by Oxford University Press (by special arrangement with Boosey & Hawkes); the suggestion had on this occasion come from the Duke of Edinburgh.

The second matter of interest thrown up by the as yet unpublished correspondence from the period of the *War Requiem* concerns Britten’s attitude towards universities, especially regarding the performance of his own works in a university environment. Britten was himself not university educated (he had attended London’s Royal College of Music, long before institutions of its ilk aspired to the academic recognition accorded to leading conservatoires in the United Kingdom today), and it has often been observed that he maintained an almost schoolboy-like mode of behavior throughout his adult life. When commissioned by Paul Sacher to compose his *Cantata Academica* for the five hundredth anniversary of the University of Basle, which fell in 1960, it was this schoolboy mentality that came to the fore as Britten embarked on the composition of a self-consciously “clever” piece for the Swiss occasion. On 3 June 1959 Britten wrote to the author of the work’s Latin text, Professor Dr Bernhard Wyss of the University of Basle, to declare: “‘Academica’ does indicate the musical character of the work, which is full of academic devices for the edification of the performers!” – a reference to the manipulations of a

twelve-note theme throughout the cantata, the structure of which falls into thirteen sections, twelve of them organized according to a sequence of pitch centers reflecting the prime order of his row. Britten had previously written to Ernst Roth (1 May) to affirm his feeling that the work should be sung in Latin regardless of the location of the performance, and he added: "The work, you will see, is bright and direct, and not too difficult for the choir. It is, however, full of elaborate musical devices suitable for the occasion – hence the title." Britten's lack of confidence in Latin was demonstrated when he later needed to ask advice on the correct wording of the work's title page in the published score. He contacted John Dancy, headmaster of Lancing College (where Pears had gone to school), who responded on 30 April 1959 to say "You've set quite a poser," and to offer advice on various suitable inscriptions and the correct form of an adjective referring to the University of Basle. It may readily be imagined that Britten felt rather at home in this school-oriented environment.

No doubt with tongue firmly in cheek, given his schoolboy-like approach to the Latin with which he was dealing (which had been the subject of a seemingly endless interchange between the composer and the text's somewhat pedantic and punctilious author), Britten wrote out the full text of the cantata – with metrical stresses carefully marked – in one of the old exercise books he had retained from his days at preparatory school. On the left-hand side of his double-page spreads, Britten established the dodecaphonic scheme of tonics for each of the first twelve movements, the thirteenth returning to the root G with which the work commenced; he also included some rough musical sketches of the twelve-note row. He subsequently used the same exercise book when planning the textual structure of the *War Requiem*; the irony that the book had been used for German grammatical exercises in his schooldays was presumably not lost on him when he was sketching his outline for a composition on the subject of war.<sup>17</sup>

Various British conductors vied to give the first performance of *Cantata Academica* in the United Kingdom following its Swiss premiere under Sacher on 1 July 1960. In the event the composer was particularly pleased that the first British performance was given by the Cambridge University Musical Society in November 1960. He wrote to Walter Legge on 3 November 1959 to say that a British premiere with the (professional) Philharmonia Orchestra was "a nice idea" but that the Cambridge performance was already fixed, and appropriate because "it is that sort of piece." Earlier in the year Britten received the degree of MusD *honoris causa* from the University of Cambridge at a ceremony held at the University's Senate House on 11 June. On 26 March, Britten had written to Mary Behrend: "I am not madly keen on honours myself, but this is one I do rather cherish – Cambridge is after all our 'local' university [Cambridgeshire being adjacent to Britten's home county, Suffolk], a lovely place, with many friends, & it is, after all rather a rare musical degree." Certainly Britten enjoyed many personal connections with Cambridge, not only with its student music society but also through his creative work with two fellows of King's College, the novelist E. M. Forster (co-librettist of *Billy Budd*) and the classical scholar Lancelot Patrick Wilkinson (who in 1963 provided a Latin text for Britten's *Cantata Misericordium* – a compact telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan that seemed to function as an understated epilogue to the *War Requiem*). Britten was indeed "not madly keen on honours" and turned down several offers of honorary degrees from other universities, for example writing to the prestigious Trinity College, Dublin, on 21 February 1953 to say "I have visited Dublin in the past, but I have, alas, no connection with the City, and I feel that such a distinction as the Board has suggested must be founded on some kind of contact."<sup>18</sup> The idea of widespread university

performances of his *Cantata Academica* was evidently appealing to him, however, and the work was published in two versions: one with a text specific to its Basle origins, for which a limited number of vocal scores was printed, and a general version with alternative textual emendations that made the score more suitable for performance at other universities.

On 9 June 1964 the Cambridge University Musical Society under joint conductors Britten and David Willcocks directed the first student performance of the *War Requiem*; the concert, in the splendid Gothic chapel of King's College, was repeated on the following day in Ely Cathedral as part of the seventeenth Aldeburgh Festival – Britten's home festival, founded by him in 1948, and long since regarded as one of the most important artistic events in the country. These concerts, mounted just two years after the work's world premiere in Coventry Cathedral, initiated the ongoing tradition of (often professional-quality) student performances of the work, of which our Yale event was a recent and distinguished example. The unexpected manner in which the *War Requiem* rapidly secured for itself a seemingly permanent niche in the ever more ambitious repertoire tackled by amateur choral societies and university music clubs is testament to the composer's innate skill in writing effective, challenging, and (above all) practicable music for combined forces of professional musicians, amateurs, students, and children. Here, perhaps, can be seen the truth of the critic Colin Mason's assertion that the piece is "almost certainly the most important work in the history of English choral music since [Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*], and a reminder that Britten has not only brought about a rebirth of English opera but has contributed perhaps more vitally than any of his contemporaries, even those who have concentrated on choral music, to the continuance of the so-called 'English choral tradition.'"<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Philip Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter 5.
2. Cooke, *War Requiem*, chapter 4.
3. Lesley Garner, "Britten and the Pity of War," *Daily Telegraph* (3 August 1991).
4. Siegfried Sassoon, "Sick Leave" ("When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm"), no. 25 of *Counter-Attack, and Other Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1918).
5. The fourth was a retired captain of the Royal Marines who died at his own hand in 1959 from an overdose of sleeping tablets taken whilst in a state of severe depression. The circumstances of Captain Piers Dunkerley's untimely death were reported in the *Daily Sketch* on 11 June 1959. It is often erroneously asserted that all four of the *War Requiem*'s dedicatees were killed on active service in the Second World War.
6. Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That* (London: Cassell, 1929; rev. ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) 157.
7. Paul Jennings, "I don't think there is any doubt that it is a masterpiece," *Radio Times* (14-20 August 1976) 4-5.
8. See Peter Shaffer's review in *Time & Tide*, 7 June 1962: "I believe it to be the most impressive

and moving piece of sacred music ever to be composed in this country, and one of the greatest musical compositions of the 20th century... I am at a loss to know how to praise the greatness of this piece of music... Here the glorifying in technical skill is a sign of spiritual fulfilment in a brilliant artist.”

9. See Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Conclusions* (London: Faber and Faber 1972) 26-7. Stravinsky would not have realized that correspondence published in the British press during the early years of the Second World War – at the time when Britten was living in the United States – had attempted to vilify the composer for his failure to participate in the defence of his homeland by using the same “Battle of Britten” pun. See Mervyn Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 3.

10. Stephen Williams, writing in the *Evening News*, 3 December 1951; see Donald Mitchell, *Cradles of the New: Writings on Music 1951-91*, selected by Christopher Palmer, ed. Mervyn Cooke (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 368-71.

11. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, volumes 1 and 2: 1923-45 (London: Faber and Faber, 1991); Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke, eds., *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, volume 3: 1946-51 (London: Faber and Faber, 2004); Philip Reed, Mervyn Cooke, and Donald Mitchell, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, volume 4: 1952-57 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press/Britten-Pears Foundation, 2008).

12. Britten borrowed this appealing description, which he wrote in pencil at the head of one of his copies of the published score of *Missa Brevis*, from a review by Donald Mitchell of the first recording of the work in a 1960 issue of *Gramophone* magazine.

13. This and all subsequent quotations from Britten’s unpublished correspondence appear by kind permission of the copyright holders, the Trustees of the Britten-Pears Foundation, and may not be further reproduced without the written permission of the Trustees.

14. For further information on Britten’s projected *St Peter* oratorio, see Reed et al., *Letters from a Life*, 4: 336-38 and 509.

15. Ronald Duncan, *Working with Britten: A Personal Memoir* (Welcombe: The Rebel Press, 1981) 141.

16. This sketch, which was acquired by the Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh, from Sotheby’s in 1988, carries a key signature of F sharp minor. This was subsequently replaced by that of B minor in the published version, even though chords of F sharp remain prominent: this is a revealing detail regarding Britten’s sensitive attitude towards the nuances of tonic-dominant relationships.

17. See Philip Reed, “The *War Requiem* in Progress,” in Cooke, *War Requiem*, 20-48; a facsimile from Britten’s notebook (GB-Alb 1-9300837) is reproduced on pp. 34-35.

18. Reed et al., *Letters from a Life*, 4:136.

19. Undated cutting from the *Manchester Guardian*, Britten-Pears Library collection, Aldeburgh.

*Mervyn Cooke is Professor of Music at the University of Nottingham (UK). He studied at London's Royal Academy of Music and at King's College, Cambridge, and was subsequently Research Fellow and Director of Music at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. His books include studies of Britten's Billy Budd and War Requiem (Cambridge University Press), Britten and the Far East (Boydell and Brewer, Inc.), Jazz (World of Art) and The Chronicle of Jazz (both Thames & Hudson/Abbeville Press); he has also edited The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten and (with David Horn) The Cambridge Companion to Jazz. His A History of Film Music was published by Cambridge University Press in 2008, and he is currently editing The Hollywood Film Music Reader for Oxford University Press. He is a co-editor of the ongoing edition of Britten's correspondence, volume 4 of which was published in 2008. He is also active as a pianist and composer.*