



## Britten

### War Requiem - World Première



In May 1962 Coventry hosted an arts festival to mark the consecration of a new cathedral. The medieval cathedral, and large parts of the surrounding city, had been very badly damaged during an air raid on 14 November 1940. Rather than attempt to rebuild it, the shell of the old cathedral was left as a symbol of the destruction caused by war (the ruin is one of Coventry's most notable tourist attractions today), and a new building was built nearby. Notable British composers were commissioned to produce new works for the arts festival. Arthur Bliss's *The Beatitudes* was heard on 25 May, Michael Tippett's *King Priam* on 29 May and Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* the following day.

The *War Requiem* intertwines the traditional Latin mass with the poems of Wilfred Owen who died in the last week of the First World War. Britten wrote the piece for large orchestra and choir, plus a chamber orchestra, a soprano soloist singing in Latin and tenor and baritone soloists performing Owen's poetry. As a noted pacifist (he had spent the war years in the USA) Britten used the opportunity to make a profound statement about the futility and brutality of war. Even before he had written the music Britten asked German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau to partner Peter Pears as tenor soloist as a sign of reconciliation. Coventry had forged lasting links with cities that were also heavily bombed during the war (it is twinned with Dresden, Stalingrad, Warsaw, and Caen among others) and Germany had provided some funding towards the new cathedral. Britten tried valiantly to secure Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya but the Soviet authorities ultimately refused her permission to sing. English soprano Heather Harper stepped in just ten days before the broadcast. Britten injured his arm shortly before the première so he enlisted the help of Meredith Davies to conduct the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra while he conducted the Melos Ensemble.

Tenor Peter Pears (1910-1986) was Britten's partner and was closely associated with his music. Britten wrote many of his operatic tenor roles specifically for Pears and he appeared in opera houses around the world as Peter Grimes, Captain Vere, and Aschenbach. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (1925-2012) was one of the pre-eminent baritones of the twentieth century, singing a wide operatic and lieder repertoire with the world's best conductors and orchestras. This is a rare example of him singing in English. Heather Harper (1930-2019) enjoyed her most consistent success at Covent Garden, where she performed a wide variety of roles between 1962 and 1981, but she also appeared in Bayreuth, New York and Buenos Aires.

# britten

## war requiem

nocturne · our hunting fathers

heather harper, soprano  
peter pears, tenor  
dietrich fischer-dieskau, baritone  
coventry festival choir  
boys of holy trinity, leamington  
boys of holy trinity, stratford  
melos ensemble  
city of birmingham symphony orchestra  
conducted by meredith davies and benjamin britten

world première, coventry cathedral, 1962

live bbc broadcast recording



PACO 166

## h1&gt;britten

## disc one

**BRITTEN War Requiem, Op. 66**

1. BBC War Requiem Introduction (3:21)
2. i. **Requiem Aeternam** - Requiem aeternam (2:55)
3. ii. Te decet hymnus (2:23)
4. iii. What passing bells for these who die as cattle (2:32)
5. iv. Kyrie eleison (1:32)
6. v. **Dies Irae** - Dies irae (3:59)
7. vi. Bugles sang saddening the evening air (2:22)
8. vii. Liber scriptus (2:57)
9. viii. Out there we've walked quite friendly up to Death (1:54)
10. ix. Recordare Jesu pie (3:15)
11. x. Confutatis maledictis (1:14)
12. xi. Be slowly lifted up thou long black arm (1:59)
13. xii. Dies irae (2:55)
14. xiii. Move him into the sun (3:22)
15. xiv. Pie Jesu Domine (2:04)
16. xv. **Offertorium** - Domine Jesu Christe (1:35)
17. xvi. Sed signifer Sanctus (2:05)
18. xvii. So Abram rose and clave the wood (3:18)
19. xviii. Hostias et preces tibi (3:13)
20. xix. **Sanctus** Sanctus (6:00)
21. xx. After the blast of lightning from the East (4:09)
22. xxi. **Agnus Dei** - One ever hangs where shelled roads part (4:00)

## disc two

1. xxii. **Libera Me** - Libera me (6:44)
  2. xxiii. It seemed that out of battle I escaped (2:31)
  3. xxiv. None said the other (6:47)
  4. xxv. Let us sleep now ... In paradisum (4:24)
  5. xxvi. Requiescant in pace (1:08)
  6. **BBC War Requiem Conclusion** (1:15)
- Live BBC Broadcast, Coventry Cathedral, 30 May 1962

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BRITTEN War Requiem (Premiere) - Nocturne - Our Hunting Fathers  
HARPER, PEARS, FISCHER-DIESKAU, MELOS ENSEMBLE, CBSO, DAVIES, BRITTEN

PACO 166

PRISTINE  
AUDIO

**BRITTEN Nocturne, Op. 60**

7. **BBC Nocturne Introduction** (0:35)
  8. I. On a poet's lips I slept (3:29)
  9. II. Below the thunders of the upper deep (3:24)
  10. III. Encinctured with a twine of leaves (2:14)
  11. IV. Midnight's bell goes ting (2:21)
  12. V. But that night when on my bed I lay (3:07)
  13. VI. She sleeps on soft, last breaths (4:16)
  14. VII. What is more gentle than a wind in summer? (3:24)
  15. VIII. When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see (3:50)
  16. **BBC Nocturne Conclusion** (0:35)
- Live BBC Broadcast, Orford Church, 21 June 1959

**BRITTEN Our Hunting Fathers, Op. 8**

17. **BBC Our Hunting Fathers Introduction** (0:52)
  18. Prologue (1:59)
  19. Rats Away! (4:33)
  20. Messalina (6:38)
  21. Dance of Death (Hawking for the Partridge) (6:06)
  22. Epilogue and Funeral March (6:53)
  23. **BBC Our Hunting Fathers Conclusion** (0:14)
- Recorded 11 June 1961, BBC Maida Vale Studio 1, TX 15 June 1961

**Peter Pears, tenor (all)**
**Heather Harper, soprano (War Requiem)**
**Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone (War Requiem)**

## Coventry Festival Choir (War Requiem)

## Boys Of Holy Trinity, Leamington (War Requiem)

## Boys Of Holy Trinity, Stratford (War Requiem)

## Melos Ensemble (War Requiem)

## City Of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (War Requiem)

## Aldeburg Festival Orchestra (Nocturne)

## London Symphony Orchestra (Our Hunting Fathers)

conducted by **Benjamin Britten** (all)

conducted by **Meredith Davies** (War Requiem)

XR remastering by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a photograph of Coventry Cathedral, 1940

Total duration: 2hr 20: 20 (CD1: 63:01, CD2: 77:19)

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