

The eve of Armistice Sunday: an appropriate choice for a performance of Britten's *War Requiem*

The eve of Armistice Sunday, Saturday 10th November, was the appropriate choice for a performance of the *War Requiem* of Benjamin Britten, given by Thames Philharmonic Choir and Thames Festival Orchestra under the direction of John Bate with Benjamin Costello as assistant conductor directing the separate chamber ensemble. Tiffin School trained the able Boys' Choir, and several extra musicians joined the chorus for this substantial and extremely complex and moving work.

The hall was packed, creating a slightly furred acoustic, a hurdle soon observed and overcome by the musicians. The chorus and Boys opened the Requiem Aeternam, the clear enunciation of tenor soloist Ben Johnson drawing us immediately into the emotional world created by Britten in this work combining the poems of Wilfred Owen and the traditional Latin Requiem, alternating in powerful supplication and grief.

The Dies Irae jolted us into an insistent call for life, the clarity of the brass and the assertion of the strings taking us into a new place, that of the battlefield. Baritone soloist Matthew Hargeaves painted the desolation as he sang Owen's shadowed words... But, suddenly, cutting through it all was the Liber Scriptus: the soprano soloist Madeleine Pierard, who had stepped in at the last minute, led from the front to bring us to the judgement of the King: with the chorus, the atmosphere was switched, and the lively false bravado of the tenor and baritone duet was heartbreaking.

The women, then the men of the chorus led in prayer in the Recordare, now confident and beseeching; further beautiful Owen poetry led us the Offertorium and the striking twist of the Abraham and Isaac biblical story, where at the end the divine mercy is ignored: he "slew his son – and half the seed of Europe, one by one".

Many people were by now reluctant about an interval... but after the break an extraordinary ethereal atmosphere was created as the Sanctus opened, followed again by more powerful and rending poetry. The Agnus Dei opened with tenor and chorus, fully involved and dragging us back to desolation and persistent prayer.

As the final movement, Libera Me, opened, the chorus captured the restless misery, with distant guns and a march, and the soprano soaring But now the scene was after death as the two former enemies meet: tenor and baritone felt in a world apart. Boys, chorus and soprano pray, finally all united, that light perpetual shine upon each one of us.

May that be so.

M N Woodroffe