

Benjamin Britten
***War Requiem* libretto**

I. REQUIEM AETERNAM

Chorus

*Lord, grant them eternal rest;
and let the perpetual light shine upon them.*

Boys

*Thou shalt have praise in Zion, of God:
and homage shall be paid to thee in Jerusalem;
hear my prayer,
all flesh shall come before Thee.*

Chorus

*Lord, grant them eternal rest;
and let the perpetual light shine upon them.*

Tenor

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons
No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, --
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them at all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Chorus

*Lord, have mercy upon them
Christ, have mercy upon them
Lord, have mercy upon them*

II. DIES IRAE

Chorus

*This day, this day of wrath
Shall consume the world in ashes,
As foretold by David and Sibyl.
What trembling there shall be
When the judge shall come
To weigh everything strictly.
The trumpet, scattering its awful sound
Across the graves of all lands
Summons all before the throne.
Death and nature shall be stunned*

*When mankind arises
To render account before the judge.*

Baritone

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air;
And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.
Voices of boys were by the river-side.
Sleep mothered them; and left the twilight sad.
The shadow of the morrow weighed on men.
Voices of old despondency resigned,
Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept.

Soprano

*The written book shall be brought
In which all is contained
Whereby the world shall be judged.
When the judge takes his seat
All that is hidden shall appear:
Nothing will remain unavenged.*

Chorus

*What shall I, a wretch, say then?
To which protector shall I appeal
When even the just man is barely safe?*

Soprano and Chorus

*King of awful majesty,
Who freely savest those worthy of salvation,
Save me, fount of pity.*

Tenor and Baritone

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death:
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,-
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,-
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorused when he sang aloft;
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.
Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death - for Life; not men - for flags.

Chorus

*Remember, gentle Jesus,
That I am the reason for Thy time on earth,
Do not cast me out on that day.*

*Seeking me, Thou didst sink down wearily,
Thou hast saved me by enduring the cross,
Such travail must not be in vain.
I groan, like the sinner that I am,
Guilt reddens my face,
Oh God spare the supplicant.
Thou, who pardoned Mary
And heeded the thief,
Hast given me hope as well.
Give me a place among the sheep
And separate me from the goats,
Let me stand at Thy right hand.
When the damned are cast away
And consigned to the searing flames,
Call me to be with the blessed.
Bowed down in supplication I beg Thee,
My heart as though ground to ashes:
Help me in my last hour.*

Baritone

Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,
Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse;
Reach at that arrogance which needs thy harm,
And beat it down before its sins grow worse;
But when thy spell be cast complete and whole,

May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!

Chorus

*This day, this day of wrath
Shall consume the world in ashes,
As foretold by David and Sibyl.
What trembling there shall be
When the judge shall come
To weigh everything strictly.*

Soprano and Chorus

*Oh this day full of tears
When from the ashes arises
Guilty man, to be judges:
Oh Lord, have mercy upon him.*

Tenor

Move him into the sun -
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Soprano and Chorus

Oh this day full of tears...

Tenor

Think how it wakes the seeds -
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?

Soprano and Chorus

...When from the ashes arises...

Tenor

Was it for this the clay grew tall?

Soprano and Chorus

...Guilty man, to be judged.

Tenor

- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Chorus

*Gentle Lord Jesus, grant them rest.
Amen.*

III. OFFERTORIUM**Boys**

*Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory,
deliver the souls of the faithful
departed from the pains of hell,
and the bottomless pit:
deliver them from the jaw of the lion, lest hell
engulf them, lest they be plunged into darkness.*

Chorus

*But let the holy standard-bearer Michael
lead them into the holy light
as Thou didst promise Abraham
and his seed.*

Tenor and Baritone

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenched there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.

When lo! and angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so,
but slew his son, -
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Boys

*Lord, in praise we offer to Thee
sacrifices and prayers, do Thou receive them
for the souls of those whom we remember
this day: Lord, make them pass
from death to life.
As Thou didst promise Abraham
and his seed.*

Chorus

*...As Thou didst promise Abraham
and his seed.*

IV. SANCTUS

Soprano and Chorus

*Holy, holy, holy
Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Holy.
Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.
Holy.*

Baritone

After the blast of lightning from the East,
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;
After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,
Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth
All death will He annul, all tears assuage? -
Fill the void veins of Life again with youth,
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?
When I do ask white Age he saith not so:
"My head hangs weighed with snow."
And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:
"My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death."

Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,
Nor my titanic tears, the sea, be dried."

V. AGNUS DEI

Tenor

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Chorus

*Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world,
grant them rest.*

Tenor

Near Golgatha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

Chorus

*Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world,
grant them rest.*

Tenor

The scribes on all the people shove
and bawl allegiance to the state,

Chorus

Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world...

Tenor

But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

Chorus

...Grant them rest.

Tenor

...Grant them peace.

VI. LIBERA ME

Chorus

*Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death
in that awful day when the heavens and earth shall be
shaken when Thou shalt come to judge the world by
fire.*

Soprano and Chorus

*I am seized with fear and trembling,
until the trial shall be at hand and the wrath to come.
Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death.
When the heavens and earth shall be shaken.
That day, that day of wrath, of calamity
and misery, a great day and exceeding bitter.
Deliver me, O Lord.*

Tenor

It seems that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."

Baritone

"None", said the other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild

After the wildest beauty in the world,
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil boldly, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from
progress.
Miss we the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-
wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even from wells we sunk too deep for war,
Even from the sweetest wells that ever were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now..."

Boys, then Chorus, then Soprano

*Into Paradise may the Angels lead thee:
at thy coming may the Martyrs receive thee,
and bring thee into the holy city
Jerusalem. May the Choir of Angels receive thee
and with Lazarus, once poor,
may thou have eternal rest.*

Boys

*Lord, grant them eternal rest,
and let the perpetual light shine upon them.*

Chorus

Into Paradise, etc.

Soprano

May the Choir of Angels, etc.

Tenor and Baritone

Let us sleep now.

Chorus

Let them rest in peace. Amen.