

Bliss and Britten: Building up Wilfred Owen as Myth

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On November 11 1985, Ted Hughes, UK's Poet Laureate, unveiled a tombstone in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner dedicated to the country's sixteen "War Poets", next to T. S. Eliot's. Among them, Wilfred Owen features prominently as the red garland that encloses their names quotes the most famous line of the Preface he drafted for the publication of his *Disabled and Other Poems*, "My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity". Since his obscure death in 1918, Owen has become one of the Great War myths—that of the young promising poet killed in heroic action, as he died on November 4 1918, a week before the Armistice was signed. As early as February 1921, after Edith Sitwell and Siegfried Sassoon had brought out Owen's war poems, critic John Middleton Murry bestowed on Owen the title "The Poet of the War" in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, as if he alone embodied all the poets of that generation. Today Owen comes second only to Shakespeare among the poets studied in British schools, making him a household name. Visitors flock to the Forester's House in Ors, France, opened to the public in 2011, where Owen spent his last moments. Monuments have been dedicated to his memory in the three British cities where he lived. Owen appears in *Regeneration*, the first volume of Pat Barker's Great War trilogy, published in 1991 and made into a film in 1997. Owen has inspired two plays, Stephen MacDonald's 1982 *Not about Heroes*, which stages Owen meeting Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart, and Xavier Hanotte's 2012 *La Nuit d'Ors, a Dramatic Fantasy in Three Scenes*, which imagines Owen's last night on the front, while the poet appears in three of Hanotte's novels and a collection of short stories. Three major biographies have attempted to explain Owen. The latest, Guy Cuthberston's *Wilfred Owen*, as well as Jane Potter's *Wilfred Owen, An Illustrated Life*, both published in 2014, appeared in time for the ceremonies in remembrance of the Great War.

If literature and film have contributed to making Owen a Great War icon, two contrasting musical works, Arthur Bliss's 1930 *Morning Heroes* and Britten's 1962 *War Requiem* especially, have been crucial in creating the Owen myth. If Bliss was the first composer ever to set Owen to music when he was only known to a limited circle of poets and critics, the worldwide success of Britten's *War Requiem* has given Owen unexpected prominence among the War poets of all times. Both works rely on the European cultural heritage, as Bliss recycles Homer's *Iliad* along with Walt Whitman's war poems and Britten sets to music some of Owen's Bible-inspired poems. Yet, their use of Owen serves different purposes. While Bliss's symphony memorialises his dead brother and comrades and celebrates the heroism of the fallen and the unfallen, Britten's work is the indictment of War by a fighting pacifist and "conchie" who will not let the dead bury the dead. This essay will first consider the circumstances and motivations that led to the compositions of the two works, then their ambition to evoke War for their audiences, and finally their call on intertextuality as they try to link time past and time present in their commemoration of the Great War in accordance with T. S. Eliot's "mythic method".

Contrasting inspirations

Bliss and Britten were contemporaries and very much aware of each other. Bliss (1891-1975) died one year before Britten (1913-1976), and their careers interconnected. Bliss's oratorio *The Beatitudes* was commissioned and first performed in Coventry in 1962 for the same occasion as Britten's *War Requiem*, who acknowledged his debts to Bliss on his seventy-fifth birthday (Reed and Cooke 52). Yet, their agendas were miles apart. Bliss's *Morning Heroes*, a symphony for orator, chorus and orchestra, was commissioned by and first performed at the 1930 Norwich Festival in the wake of the first commemorations of the Great War in Britain. As Bliss's autobiography indicates (96-97), he wrote his piece in memory of his comrade soldiers and especially his much-admired brother Kennard, who died in the Somme offensive in 1916 at age 24, while Bliss himself was home after having been wounded in the same battle. In the late 1920s, Bliss, who had served with gallantry, was still troubled by nightmares after

having been gassed at Cambrai in 1918 and plagued by survivor's guilt, which he had tried to assuage by converting to Catholicism, as it includes confession among its sacraments, before going back to France in June 1918. Bliss had attempted to memorialise his brother in a piece called *Battle Variations*, which he eventually abandoned before dedicating to him the slow movement of his 1925 *Suite for piano* (Kennedy 217). The symphony functioned as a therapy as his nightmares disappeared afterwards, recalling the advice Owen and his poet friend Siegfried Sassoon received at Craiglockhart Hospital in 1917: to write about their war experiences.

Britten's work was written for the Coventry Arts Festival Committee to celebrate the spirit of reconciliation and unity associated with the consecration of the new cathedral, completed in the 1960s, since the Blitz had destroyed the old one in November 1940. The event was of national importance as it involved major British architects and artists and was seen as the last stage in the country's cultural renaissance initiated with the 1951 Festival of Britain (Hillier 10). As a lifelong pacifist, Britten could only approve of the consecration's agenda. The three soloists he chose for the first performance, all friends of his, represented the nations engaged in World War II. His life-long companion, the tenor Peter Pears, a pacifist, stood for Britain, baritone Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau for Hitler's Germany and soprano Galina Vischnesvkaia for Stalin's USSR.¹ Born in 1913 in Lowestoft, Britten was a "war baby" as the town was bombarded by German warships in April 1916. What he heard or remembered about the war as a child was reactivated by reading the names of the alumni who had died during the Great War in the chapel memorial of Gresham, where he was educated. As of 1927 he took private music lessons with composer Frank Bridge (1879-1941) who had lost many pupils during the war, especially young composer Ernest Bristow Farrar, to whom he dedicated his 1924 *Piano Sonata*. Bridge pressed his utter horror and revulsion on Britten, who often argued his own pacifist case with his master (Carpenter 41). As a registered "conchie", Britten had no direct experience of war. Yet, he saw

¹ Soviet authorities found the proximity of former foes so revolting that they barred her from singing in the first performance, even though she did record Britten's piece in 1963 for the Decca recording that sold millions of copies (Carpenter 409).

the destructions inflicted by the Blitz in England on his return from the USA in 1942, which he evokes directly in his *Canticle III, Still Falls the Rain*, op. 55 of 1954, and the late war's "doodlebugs". In 1946, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings spurred him on to compose a full-scale oratorio for soloist, chorus and orchestra "almost like the *Messe des Morts*" whose telling title was to be *Mea Culpa* (Carpenter 405). Later, the shock of Gandhi's death prompted him to compose in his memory, but both attempts remained fruitless. The Coventry commission was a welcome opportunity for Britten to take up the pacifism of his pre-war years.

First conceived as a traditional requiem mass, his opus soon evolved into a work where the Latin text would alternate with poems by Wilfred Owen, whom he had long admired. Their prominence resulted in Britten's calling the piece his "Owen Mass", before choosing the final title late in 1961 (Cooke 24). His *War Requiem* looks back on both World Wars, as it is dedicated to four friends of his who died in or after World War II, but it also feeds on current events like the Cold War and the threat of nuclear warfare. Yet, its main protagonists are two Great War soldiers, the personas of Wilfred Owen, which links Britten's *Requiem* and Bliss's *Morning Heroes*, as the latter's final movement incorporates the recitation of Owen's "Spring Offensive" by the Orator, the first known setting of Owen's poetry to music.²

Representing war through drama

The two works aim at a representation of what war means to both soldiers and civilians through drama. *Morning Heroes* unfolds like Berlioz's five-movement *Symphonie Fantastique*, a work charged with autobiographical significance. It opens with the Orator's recitation of "Hector's Farewell to Andromache" from Book VI of the *Iliad*, while the second movement sets "First O, Songs for a Prelude", the opening poem from Whitman's *Drum Taps* collection of poems, which Bliss calls "The City Arming", as the

² Britten knew Bliss's work, which he heard in 1931 and 1933, about which he had a poor opinion, though he may have had it in mind when composing his own. "Fine bits in the 2nd movement & some terribly ordinary bits"; "Truly dated, massacre of fine words" (Evans 68, 153).

chorus calls up the enthusiasm of those who enlisted in 1914. The third movement combines “Vigil”, a translation of the Chinese poet Li-Tai-Po that evokes the suffering of the women at home,³ and “The Bivouac’s Flame”, another *Drum Taps* setting of “By the bivouac’s fitful flame”, depicting the longing of the soldiers for those they left behind. The scherzo for the chorus sets “Achilles Goes Forth to Battle” from the *Iliad*’s Book XIX, translated by Chapman, followed by “The Heroes”, a roll call of the warriors involved in the Trojan Wars, as its coda. The final movement is also in two parts. The Orator first recites Owen’s “Spring Offensive” over timpani cords and the final chorus is a setting of “Dawn on the Somme”, a poem written in the summer of 1918 by Bliss’s friend, fellow-poet and soldier, Robert Nichols (1893-1944), who served in the Royal Artillery from 1914 to 1916 when he was invalided out.⁴

Bliss’s symphony clearly hints at the theatre. Since Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* and its final chorus or Berlioz’s *Romeo et Juliette*, “a dramatic symphony for chorus, soli and a choral recitative as prologue” (Honegger 976-77) the symphony has been invested with dramatic functions akin to those of the cantata or the oratorio. As he recounts in his autobiography, Bliss always found it easier to write “dramatic” music than “pure” music: “I like the stimulus of words, or a theatrical setting, a colourful occasion or the collaboration of a great player” (Bliss 71). His orchestra plays a dynamic role in the drama with the extended preludes for the first, third and fifth movement. The Orator’s interventions for two very dramatic incidents, “the Homeric scene” (Bliss 97) of Hector’s Farewell and the Great War scene of Owen’s “Spring Offensive”, in the two extreme movements, create the symmetry of a palindrome, accentuated by the roll call of the Heroes, which includes Hector. They provide the symphony with a dramatic frame, while the heroic theme, indicated by the title, acts like Berlioz’s *idée fixe* in his *Symphonie Fantastique* and unites all five movements.

³ Li Bai or Li Po (701-762) is mostly known by Hans Bethge’s translations in his anthology, *The Chinese Flute*, which inspired Mahler for his *Das Lied von der Erde*.

⁴ He had published two volumes of poetry, *Invocation* (1915) and *Ardours and Endurances* (1917) and Bliss extracted his “Dawn on the Somme” from *Aurelia and Other Poems* of 1920.

The use of the Orator and chorus combination derives from Greek tragedy, which stages the myths borrowed from tradition. Bliss, literally raised on the Classics by his father, adapts it here for his own use. The part of the Speaker in *Oedipus Rex*, Stravinsky's opera-oratorio of 1927, a composer he greatly admired, may have been an example. The melodrama technique, which musicalises the text thanks to orchestral textures without resorting to song, was adopted as an alternative to an operatic duet which would have softened the impact of the farewell: "I am always aware that in those two movements, where narration joins with music, the emotional temperature in the audience rises" (Bliss 97). The Homeric scene is introduced by an elegiac orchestra prelude in compound time, where the cor anglais, the oboe and the clarinet and strings feature prominently in a short four-bar arching phrase that expresses the waste and sorrow of war (Bliss "Part I"). It then underpins the Orator's recitation, to which the orchestra provides a varied, attentive commentary. The Owen poem, coming after the violent choral Achilles scherzo, whose words are usually difficult to understand, is recited over F minor timpani chords, providing stark dramatic contrast and painting an aural image of the mystery and solemnity of dawn as well as of the fury of the sudden attack, in tune with Owen's poem (Bliss "Part V"). Bliss was a friend of Darius Milhaud's and very much aware of the music of the French *Groupe des Six*, which included Honegger (Bliss 56, 89). The melodrama technique recalls Honegger's experiments in his 1921 *Roi David*, described as "a dramatic psalm for soli, chorus and orchestra" (subtitle), rather than Edith Sitwell and William Walton's 1923-1926 *Façade*, another experiment with narration combined to music. But Bliss here foregoes the *Six*-inspired audacities of his previous production and his elegiac, pastoral mood is clearly indebted to the composers of the English musical renaissance of the 1900s.

As an oratorio, Britten's *War Requiem* also belongs to the stage. It echoes Berlioz's and Verdi's *Requiem*, two very theatrical pieces as regards the expression of terror and grief, whose dramatic purpose is more obvious as the Liturgy of the Dead recalls Tragedy. The *Dies Irae* and *Libera Me* introduce the essentials of Aristotelian tragedy, catharsis, terror and pity. The Sybil provides the dramatic spring of prophecy in the *Dies Irae*, while the *Inter Oves* introduces the scapegoats whose fault is the root of all tragic action: "*Et ab haedis me sequestra.*" Two of Owen's poems, strategically

placed at significant moments of the Requiem Mass, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” in the *Offertorium* and “At a Calvary near the Ancre” for the *Agnus Dei* clearly identify satanic Pride both as *hamartia* and Original Sin, the primary cause of the evils of war, musically characterised by a tritone, the musical interval called *diabolus in musica* and forbidden as such by the early Church. Britten took the implicit drama of the Requiem Mass one step further. He opposes three separate musical groups and the composer was very explicit about the staging of his work (Cooke 24). The organ and the boys’ choir in the organ loft evoke a world removed from human contingencies. The two soldiers and the chamber orchestra take us to the battlefield and voice their private grief while the soprano, chorus and orchestra provide an image of the Home Front and convey the conventional pieties of public grief, affected by the echoes of Verdi’s music. The laying out in space of the different groups dramatises the basic bipolarity of World War I between the front and home underlined by Paul Fussell, borne out by the titles of World War I poems, like Robert Nichols’s *Ardours and Endurances*, Robert Graves’s *Fairies and Fusiliers* or Ivor Gurney’s *Severn and Somme* (Fussell 79-82). It also dramatises Britten’s major theme in his operas, the opposition between the individual and the crowd and the tragic trope of public drama and private predicament. All are encapsulated in the title’s oxymoron—as War and Eternal Rest make strange bedfellows—realised musically with the recurrent use of the disquieting tritone. The whole set-up provided such effective staginess that Vischnesvkaia literally had a fit during the first recording session as she could not understand why she was separated from the other soloists.

“The mythic method”

Very little action can actually be shown in a symphony, but enough is suggested to create a plot. Bliss’s and Britten’s work resort to dramatic monologues, or derived forms, and the use of “I” and “We” creates the illusion of protagonists acting out their parts: the fact that both composers wrote operas is no coincidence. *Morning Heroes* provides a number of scenes that indicate a dramatic progression. They oppose Hector and Achilles, while Li-Tai-Po’s warrior’s wife in “Vigil” stands for Andromache and all grieving women, thus reworking Homer’s epic. Those scenes are

linked together by dramatic, musical and textual cross-references, while the Orator-chorus interaction provides movement. The historical and geographical references they convey, from the far-away past of Homer's Greece and Li-Tai-Po's China to the American Civil War, and from Whitman's time to Bliss's own war, propel the symphony forward in one single movement, space and time being made one, moving from enlistment to the theatre of war, and from there to Olympus. Homer's epic provides a narrative link and recalls Joyce's use of Homer in *Ulysses*, which Eliot analysed as the "mythic method", used in *The Waste Land*, his own epic poem which durably impressed Bliss.

In manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. (...) It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (...) Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythic method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art. (Eliot, "Ulysses" 483)

Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the acme of intertextuality with its "heap of broken images" and "fragments shored against (...) ruin" (*Collected* 63, 79) truly seems to have inspired the composer as the symphony mingles and recycles fragments of history as well as personal recollections.⁵ Over the implicit narrative of the Trojan wars, which his father was fond of retelling his sons and illustrating with ink sketches (Bliss 17), Bliss imposes the bloodiest episode of America's history, the country where his father was born and to which Bliss felt a strong allegiance, seen through the eyes of Whitman, as well as that of the recent history of England and Bliss's own

⁵ The inclusion of the Li-Tai-Po poem may also derive from family connections as Bliss's Uncle Kennard had lived and worked in China for many years and was reputed to have been given the title of Mandarin (Bliss 16).

early enlistment. Moreover, Chapman's translation of Homer provides the link between Keats and Owen, the former being the latter's favourite poet (Cuthbertson 31), through Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer". By borrowing Whitman's Civil War poetry to comment on the Great War, Bliss deliberately turned to the pre-World War I generation of British composers of the great English choral tradition, Charles Villiers Stanford, Charles Wood, Frederick Delius, Gustav Holst and Vaughan Williams. They had fervently read William Michael Rossetti's 1868 expurgated edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Kramer 26), set Whitman to music and may have provided a model for Bliss's own anthological libretto. The American poet, free from religious or political dogma, provided enough democratic idealism, symbolism and mysticism. With his belief in the soul's ability to transcend time and death, he presented a valid alternative to biblical texts and Christian faith and offered the prospect of a numinous future. Present in Parts I and II, the Good Grey poet, who claims Homer and Virgil's *Aeneid* as his lineage with "First O Songs for a Prelude", is also present in Part V. It opens with an epigraph "Now, Trumpeter for thy close", from the concluding section of Whitman's "Mystic Trumpeter", section 8, which clearly rings a new tone for the final apotheosis:

Now trumpeter for thy close,
 Vouchsafe a higher strain than any yet,
 Sing to my soul—renew its languishing faith and hope;
 Rouse up my slow belief—give me some vision of the future,
 Give me for once its prophecy and joy. (Whitman 482)⁶

This suggests strong associations with the many Trumpeters, nine in total, that appear at different times in *Revelations* and contribute to its narration. This is Bliss's own *Dies Irae*, *Tuba Mirum* and Second Coming rolled into one. This part moves from the general to the personal as it is explicitly devoted to the dedicatees of the symphony, Bliss's brother and comrades, and the only time when the war front is directly evoked, more by words

⁶ The poem was set to music by Gustav Holst, among others, also involved in the war as a non-combatant. His *Mystic Trumpeter*, for soprano and orchestra, op. 18, was first performed in 1905. Bliss knew Holst and took his music to Holst, but Bliss does not mention the work in his autobiography.

than by music, contrary to the shrill-demented Achilles scherzo. Owen's poem, revised in September 1918 while Owen and Bliss himself were back on the front, takes us to the battlefield, with a group of soldiers bracing themselves before going over and into the No Man's Land to meet their fate, and records Owen's own experience at Squash Valley and Fig Wood near St Quentin in April 1917 (Hibberd 426). Its Keatsian vision of summer, sun, buttercups and midges and its wealth in nature imagery recalls what Bliss described as the acute awareness of natural beauties soldiers developed with the proximity with war and death (Burn 667). The poem then describes the blast and fury of battle, the dead whom "God caught (...) even before they fell" and the amazed survivors unable to speak of their comrades. Woodwind music from the first movement underlines the poem's final question "Why speak not they of comrades that went under?" and leads to the choral "Dawn on the Somme", which concludes the symphony in an apotheosis (Bliss "Part V"). Owen's friendly sun, now personified as Apollo,⁷ draws to Olympus the dead soldiers as so many companies of "morning heroes". A brief coda which associates the symphony's essential themes provides a subdued conclusion to this final part, which ends, like Eliot's "Hollow Men", in a whimper: "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" (*Collected* 92).

Britten shaped his *War Requiem* text like an opera libretto with a complex and meaningful architecture. The Requiem Mass mingles two narratives, first Christ's Second Coming depicted in the *Dies Irae* sequence and recalled in the final *Libera Me*, and Christ's Sacrifice and Passion, as recalled in the *Offertorium* and *Agnus Dei*. The six parts of the liturgy provide a general framework of six scenes, in which Britten inserts the Owen poems to which they are linked by ironical cross-references and foreshadowing, so that the impression is that of a succession of scenes leading to a climax in a way that also recalls Eliot's mythic method.⁸

⁷ Bliss's own "Hymn to Apollo", invoking Apollo as the god of healing, *Apollo latromantis*, physician, seer, but also Sun God, dates from 1926.

⁸ Britten had known Eliot personally in the late 1940s and they attempted to work together in 1948, but Britten waited for the end of his life to set two early Eliot poems, one of which Eliot incorporated in *The Waste Land*.

The opening *Introit & Kyrie* sequence takes the mourners inside a procession with a faltering funeral march. It is followed by the four sequences of the *Dies Irae*, *Offertorium*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, which lead to the Eucharist. The *Libera Me* implies a recessional, indicated by another march, followed by the burial of the dead and their final transition to everlasting peace with “In Paradisum”. On this pattern Britten superimposes, through some of Owen’s most controversial and blasphemous poems, the narrative of two soldiers on the front, gradually driven to despair before their own death, burial and reconciliation with “Strange Meeting”. Seven of the poems show scenes from the war front, while in “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” for the *Offertorium* and in “The End” after the *Sanctus* Owen gives the Scriptures a bitter twist.

In his parody of the *Offertorium*’s liturgy of sacrifice, Britten displays savage irony to match Owen’s. Britten’s “Canticle II, Abram and Isaac” of 1952, a cantata for three voices based on the Chester miracle play, shows the patriarch about to sacrifice his son in allegiance to the God of Israel, only to be stopped by God’s Angel, who promises him a long line of descent. He then sacrifices a ram, thus indicating the end of human sacrifice and the basis for a new covenant (“Canticle II”). Owen’s “The Parable” parodies the Scripture in a mock-archaic style in the context of the trenches. Reverting to his original Chaldean name predating his alliance with Jehovah, Abram sacrifices his son instead of the Ram of Pride, heedless of the Angel’s message. Britten inserts Owen’s parody right in the middle of the *Offertorium*. The boys’ melody for the “Domine Jesu Christe”, which leads to “The Parable” directly derives from “Canticle II”. “The Parable” is narrated by the baritone as Abram and the Tenor as Isaac, who unite their voices for the part of the Angel, like in “Canticle II”. This pure C major passage is soon polluted by the tritone as Abram kills his son. The transgression of the divine order “And half the seed of Europe one by one” interrupts the boys’ “Hostias et Preces”, whose melody is now disrupted by the organ’s dissonances, as if tainted by sin (Britten “III.”)

Britten proceeds likewise with *Sanctus*, in which he inserts Owen’s “The End”, the poet’s parody of the Second Coming. It opens with the jubilation of the Soprano and her praise of the Lord of Hosts to the sounds of a stylised oriental gamelan, which also illustrates the baritone’s “After the blast of lighting from the East” in “The End”. The tritone and timpani

accompany the Baritone's questioning of Resurrection "Shall life renew these bodies?". The answer is provided by two Titanic deities, Age and Earth, who turn the Christian Doomsday into some geological accident akin to the death of a star, while the orchestral postlude suggests the end of the world with an Eliotesque whimper (Britten "IV. Sanctus.") The Baritone's questioning recalls the Tenor's "Futility" poem, which interrupts the Soprano's effusive "Lacrymosa" in the *Dies Irae* sequence. The soldier's initial tenderness for a dead comrade turns to blasphemy as he questions Genesis and Creation: "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" His repeated question also denies Resurrection and Eternal Life posited with the chorus "*qua resurget in favilla*".

For the number before the Eucharist, imposing for once his voice and choice on the chorus, the Tenor initiates the *Agnus Dei* section, with Owen's "At a Calvary near the Ancre". The poem, dated late 1917 or early 1918, expands a letter of Owen to his mother, dated mid-May 1917, where he articulates newly found beliefs: "One of Christ's essential commands: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed but never kill!". He then calls himself "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience", a description that also fits Britten (Hibberd 310-11). Further on he writes, "Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear His voice. Greater love hath no man than this that a man may lay down his life —for a friend", deliberately misquoting John's Gospel's 15: 13 "for his friends" used by propagandists to say that any soldier who died in battle was a modern saviour. Recalling Christ's sacrifice in a Calvary scene, the poem shows the scribes and priests, here the war-mongering politicians and clergy who encouraged hate of the Germans, like the Bishop of London claiming that God was on the British side. All bear the mark of Evil and attend the Crucifixion while Christ's disciples hide in fear, thus reminding scribes and priests of their direct responsibility for his death as well as for the soldiers'. Owen's gospel of love, "But they who love the greater love/ Lay down their life. They do not hate", is isolated for full emphasis, and the Tenor's final "*Dona nobis pacem*", instead of the regular liturgical "*Dona eis requiem sempiternam*", defiantly claims peace for the soldiers only (Britten "V.").

Making Wilfred Owen a Great War myth

The visions of the war and of Wilfred Owen the two works choose to show differ greatly. Bliss's synopsis of his symphony explains his choice of texts and leaves no doubt that, as a soldier who enlisted, was wounded and fought throughout the war, his aim was to vindicate his comrades and their sacrifice, his "morning heroes" worthy of Homeric fame and universal homage (Bliss 256-57). In this way he obeys the brief of Nichols, Owen and Sassoon, i.e. to make the ones at home understand and remember what their lives was like on the Front. Yet choosing Nichols's "Dawn on the Somme" at the close of his symphony for the final apotheosis, with Apollo raising the dead to Olympus, shows how Bliss differs from Owen and Sassoon. Nichols paid Owen's poems a generous tribute in his *Anthology of War Poetry 1914-1918* of 1943. Its Preface explains that, even if his initial ardour and the will to fight had gradually given way to grief for the dead and compassion for those who endured, he "ended the war only confirmed in the faith that was [his] in the beginning" (Charlton 54-55). Bliss, like Whitman's "Mystic Trumpeter", viewed the war as immensely sad but heroic, a vision which he apparently maintained to the end of his life. His wife recalls that when advice was sought as to the sleeve for the record of *Morning Heroes* made by EMI in 1974, he selected a great Fifth Century Greek vase showing Hector and Achilles fighting (Bliss 287). For Bliss the Classic scholar, the model of his funeral ode is undoubtedly Pericles's Funeral Oration extracted from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which American Civil War scholars have suggested as a potential model for Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, all part of Bliss's American heritage.

As *The Musical Times* indicated in 1930 (H.G. 886), Bliss's position certainly sounded crude, offensive and dangerously close to a glorification of war to those who had read Sassoon, Graves and Blunden, R. C. Sheriff, Richard Aldington, Remarque or Barbusse, whom Bliss must have known. Like his brother, he shared the bitter disillusion of a Sassoon, as their letters from the front indicate, but he was impelled to go back and fight and put on a brave face, like Sassoon and Owen, whose "Spring Offensive" is one of his most consensual poems. Bliss clearly identified the latter with his brother, "poet, painter and musician", as a symbol of all the young talents

killed in or by the war, like composer George Butterworth killed on the Somme, or Ivor Gurney, his former fellow-student at the Royal College of Music, who survived the war in dire mental conditions. *Morning Heroes* was a way for him to come to terms with the trauma of his brother's death and of his own survival in a world that had become alien to him, as can be inferred from the very personal reasons in the choice of his poems, akin to Eliot's "broken images" in Eliot's own war poem, which Bliss could still quote from in 1969 (Bliss 276).

In 1930, his choice of Owen was courageous as the poet was practically unknown to the general public or, like Sassoon, denounced by critics as unpatriotic, as he showed a nation divided between the soldiers on the battlefield and the Home Front. Both were excluded from W. B. Yeats's anthology *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* of 1936 for aesthetic reasons, as Yeats thought that passive suffering was not an appropriate theme for poetry. The publication of Edmund Blunden's autobiography, *Undertones of War*, in 1928, and his augmented edition of Owen's poems in 1931 initiated a slow reappraisal of Owen's poetry. As "The Poet of the War", he was celebrated during World War II and Blunden's edition of his poems was republished in 1955. Dennis Welland's 1960 *Wilfred Owen, A Critical Study*, the first work of major scope devoted to the poet, coincided with a change of mind in British public opinion as Owen was becoming part of the literary canon and of the country's A-level exams. With the Sixties and "Flower Power", there came a reassessment of the poetry of 1914-1918, as indicated by Cecil Day Lewis's edition of Owen's poems in 1963, and Wilfred Owen's biography, *Journey from Obscurity*, written by his younger brother Harold and published in three volumes between 1963 and 1965.

Britten's *Requiem* eerily tapped or foreshadowed that vein but his vision is much darker and his tone more bitter. It is that of a pacifist and a "conchie", compounded with his experience of the World War II destructions at home, the horrors of the Shoah seen in Bergen-Belsen in July 1945, the shadows of the Cold War and totalitarianism, the fear of the bomb and his left-wing mistrust of an Establishment that had sought a compromise with Hitler. Britten had read Sassoon, Graves and Blunden. His were the times of Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1938) and Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) which showed the absurdity of the war, the futility

of the sacrifice of human lives and the cruelty of senior officers. To people of Britten's generation, like his mentor, the poet W. H. Auden, or his friend, the novelist Christopher Isherwood (Parker 93, 350-82), Wilfred Owen was a hero and embodied the generation either willingly sacrificed or driven to despair and blasphemy by its elders. Britten literally became besotted with Owen during the *Requiem* composition and probably transferred his feelings for young Wulff Scherchen in the late 1930s to Owen, especially after Isherwood provided him with a picture of Owen in uniform in 1961 (Carpenter 119). Britten owned the 1955 edition of Owen's poetry edited by Blunden in 1931 as well as Sassoon's 1920 edition. In 1958, during a BBC programme in his honour, Britten asked for Owen's "Strange Meeting" and "Kind Ghosts" to be read. The same year, he set the latter in his *Nocturne*,⁹ whose imagery and music prefigures the *Requiem*'s "Strange Meeting". That long piece echoes Owen's Preface to his collection of poems and articulates Owen's *ars poetica*, with which Britten so completely identified that he placed it on the first page of his score. Owen's words echoed the concept of "parable art" Britten had learnt from Auden and made his throughout his work (Mitchell 17). With his *War Requiem*, Britten assumed the mantle of combating poet which had fallen from Owen's shoulders and turned him into a mythical figure for the late twentieth century. For all the blasphemy and the bitter denunciation, for all the cataclysms of brass and drums, what is remembered from the *Requiem* is its sympathy with suffering, the voice of the soprano keening in the "Lacrymosa" and the next-to final duet of the soldiers "Let us sleep", a lullaby whose music echoes the ethos of Bliss's setting of Nichols. Britten's music, like Bliss's, ends in a whimper and in silence, perhaps that of Armistice, as suggested by Kate Kennedy in *Silent Morning*, or that which leads to private recollection and meditation. The Great War commemorations of the past years have brought out new recordings of Bliss's symphony while Britten's *Requiem* has never disappeared from the concert hall. The Owen myth to which both contributed lives on.

⁹ The sixth piece in the *Nocturne for tenor, 7 obbligato instruments and strings* op. 60, with the cor anglais as the solo instrument.

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ABSTRACT

On November 11 1985, Ted Hughes, UK's Poet Laureate, unveiled a tombstone in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner dedicated to the country's War Poets, which prominently featured Wilfred Owen as it quoted his Preface's most famous line: "My subject is War and the pity of War". Since his obscure death in 1918, Owen has become part of the Great War myths, that of the young promising poet killed in heroic action. This paper's objective is to examine how that myth was gradually born in the arts, first with Arthur Bliss's 1930 choral symphony *Morning Heroes*, which recycles Homer's *Iliad*, along with Walt Whitman's war poems, and with Benjamin Britten's 1962 *War Requiem*, which definitely made Owen's a household name and the most popular poet in the UK after Shakespeare, the hero of several biographies and plays, which combines in an ironic counterpoint the Mass for the Dead and Owen's own Bible-inspired poems.

KEYWORDS

Owen; myth; Bliss; *Morning Heroes*; Britten; *War Requiem*

RESUMO

A 11 de novembro de 1985, Ted Hughes, o poeta laureado do Reino Unido, desvelou no Canto dos Poetas da Abadia de Westminster uma pedra tumular dedicada aos poetas da Guerra que destacava Wilfred Owen ao citar o excerto mais famoso do seu Prefácio: "A Guerra é o meu tema e a compaixão da Guerra." Desde a sua morte obscura em 1918, Owen tornou-se parte dos mitos da Grande Guerra, no caso, o mito do jovem poeta promissor morto em acção heroica. É objectivo do presente trabalho examinar como tal mito foi gradualmente nascendo nas artes: em 1930, através de *Morning Heroes*, a Sinfonia Coral de Arthur Bliss, que recicla a *Iliada* de Homero e os poemas de guerra de Walt Whitman, em 1962 através do *War Requiem* de Benjamin Britten. Britten indubitavelmente tornou Owen um nome familiar, o poeta mais popular do Reino Unido a seguir

a Shakespeare, o herói de várias biografias e peças teatrais. Em contraponto irónico, *War Requiem* combina a Missa dos Mortos e os poemas de Owen inspirados na Bíblia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Mito de Owen; Bliss; *Morning Heroes*; Britten; *War Requiem*
