

Review of:

Benjamin Britten, *War Requiem*

Saturday, 17 November 2012 - 7:30pm

Guildford Cathedral

Soloists: Alla Kravchuk (Soprano), Philip O'Brien (Tenor) and Gareth Brynmor John (Baritone)

Vivace Chorus, Freiburg Bachchor, Tiffin Boys' Choir, Brandenburg Sinfonia

Conductor: Jeremy Backhouse

Britten's *War Requiem* will, one can confidently predict, receive numerous performances across the globe between now and the end of 2013, the composer's centenary year. It is not, though, a work that it is advisable to hear too often, particularly live: the emotional impact is considerable, and can be searing, and is not guaranteed to blunt on repeated hearings. The performance at Guildford Cathedral on 17 November gave full measure to the most intense moments. Gareth Brynmor John's solo in the later stages of the setting of Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting', the emotional heart of the work, was particularly fine, displaying the intelligence, control, and range of nuance one associates with the baritone for whom the part was written, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. He was also excellent in the more declamatory 'Be slowly lifted up thou long black arm', with its terrifying – and terrifyingly high – final note. In both he was well supported by polished and energetic playing from the chamber orchestra.

The chorus's chorale at the end of the work, and its two earlier manifestations, was also particularly well done. Singing unaccompanied, with harmony that is not easy to pitch, everyone needs to hold their nerve here, for it is the parting gesture, and the success of the performance depends heavily upon it. That it came off so well is testimony to the hard work of the chorus and the skills of the conductor, Jeremy Backhouse, who conducted throughout with incisive clarity and judicious pacing. The one quibble I have with the latter is the approach to the climactic chord of the 'Libera Me', the loudest event in the work. Britten writes in the score that there should be a slow acceleration to this point, but Backhouse put in a slight slowing down just before. It is a small point, but the slowing down tends to signal the arrival of the chord; if the acceleration continues unabated the chord explodes upon you before you know what's happening. The extent to which this might be a more accurate representation of the battlefield most of us fortunately will never know.

At its first performance *War Requiem* employed two conductors, such are the complexities of holding it together. The very large forces are ranged over many square feet, and maintaining exactitude of ensemble, especially in a reverberant building like the Cathedral, is not easy. So there were inevitably some small inaccuracies: the strings' lines in the opening movement were not always precisely together, for instance, and there was some hesitancy in the semi-chorus in the 'Quid sum miser' section of the *Dies Irae*. There were some occasional balance problems, too, though some potential ones were triumphantly overcome. The normal positioning of the solo soprano in performances of

the work is at the front of chorus, behind the orchestra. This presents some challenges of projection. The rather steely tone of the singer for whom it was written, Galina Vishnevskaya, was well suited to dealing with these challenges, and Alla Kravchuk found a nice blend of steel and lyricism, soaring luminously at the climax of the 'In paradisum' section.

Anyone singing the solo tenor part is in the invidious position of being compared with Peter Pears. Philip O'Brien doesn't quite have Pears's ability to float, or his range of tone, so that the end of the 'Agnus Dei' was a tad prosaic, though the melodic line in general was strongly shaped and communicated, and he was particularly strong in the more dramatic passages. It is a great shame, though, that he chose to return to his seat after his passage in 'Strange Meeting', thus limiting the impact of 'togetherness' that Britten is aiming for there.

A final word on the boys' chorus, from Tiffin School: they were terrific. I can't imagine their part being better done.

Christopher Mark