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## Choral Responses to War at a Great Basilica

by **Vance R. Koven**

The title given by the Seraphim Singers under by Music Director Jennifer Lester, to their Sunday concert, “The Short Twentieth Century,” appropriated the Berend-Hobsbawm phrase for the period from the start of World War I to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, to examine choral music’s response to war and violence. As is the nature of these things, the concept and the actual program weren’t entirely congruent, but there was enough internal logic that its many parts came together with emotional and artistic satisfaction at the Basilica and Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the twin-towered colossus atop Mission Hill in Roxbury.

Consisting mostly of shorter works (the longest came last), the show began with a set that linked the two great wars of the century, starting with the *Agnus Dei* section of Britten’s *War Requiem*. While written as a World War II memorial (with interesting links to another piece in the program), Britten’s technique was to add to the liturgical requiem texts settings of anti-war poetry by Wilfred Owen from the first war, in this case berating the “scribes” of governments who send out their young to become sacrificial lambs. The *Agnus Dei* is primarily a tenor solo, taken by Mark Nemeskal in a forward, clarion voice with excellent intonation but a wider vibrato than we prefer. The orchestral accompaniment, reduced for organ by the distinguished Philip Brunelle, was played by Heinrich Christensen, Music Director of King’s Chapel, who rendered its sometimes acrid sounds with diplomatic sensitivity on the church’s 1897 Hutchings organ.

Lester chose to place the chorus for most of the concert up in the choir-organ loft way at the back of the church, which both strained the necks of audience members wishing to see the musicians and sent the music the full length of the echo chamber that the church’s cavernous architecture creates—very pretty to look at, but once you get past plainchant the sound rapidly turns to mud. Very little that was sung, even in English, was discernable, and if one ever put down the booklet, finding one’s place again was a chore. This arrangement may suit the purposes of a religious service, to some tastes, but concert performances should generally be both seen and heard.

There followed a set of three short a cappella compositions by Hubert Parry (1848-1918), best known for the hymn “Jerusalem” but who was a composer of formidable gifts, whose four symphonies and numerous other large works created the classic “English” sound that Elgar and others appropriated later. The selections performed Sunday (“I know my soul hath power,” “Never weather-beaten sail,” and “There is an old belief”)

comprise half of his late *Songs of Farewell*, written during the Great War and mixing social and personal thoughts at the passing of the old order and himself. The texts of the first two selections were Elizabethan (Davies and Champion), while the last was from John Lockhart, a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer. The first lamented the weaknesses and follies of humans (“...I know myself a Man—/Which is a proud and yet a wretched thing.”), the others reflect a touchingly retrograde, as moderns would see it, faith in the life to come. Parry’s settings hew to his Romantic provenance, with rich harmonies and some lovely chord changes, and a restrained yet effective polyphony, with a nod to a more advanced chromaticism in the Lockhart setting. The chorus, as it did throughout the concert, proffered subtle colors, precise and immaculate ensemble, and perfect intonation.

As an inspired counterpoint to Parry, this set closed with Charles Ives’s muscular and feisty setting of “In Flanders Fields,” one of the self-published “114 Songs.” Nemeskal and Christensen (on piano) performed this from the front of the church, and while Nemeskal was clear-voiced as ever, and vocally communicative, his physical inertness somewhat undercut the go-get-‘em forwardness of Ives’s setting (which, given the text, by Ives’s Mutual Insurance Company colleague John McCrae, could have come out elegiac). Christensen ably navigated the complexities of Ives’s accompaniment, though with the lid of the piano opened toward the stage rather than the audience, the sound came out a bit muffled.

Tom Vignieri, who labors by day as a producer for NPR and PBS, and who has been an administrator for the BSO at Tanglewood and for the Handel & Haydn Society, composed *There Will Come Soft Rains* in 2010 (thus outside the range of the nominal program focus—maybe one should be talking about the Long 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as one does of the 18<sup>th</sup>?), but it sets a poem by Sara Teasdale from 1920, and thus clearly falls within the range of reflections on the Great War. The text wryly observes nature reclaiming the wasted fields of war, and bitterly concludes that she wouldn’t miss us if we were gone. Vignieri’s setting is not as biting, but contains much of interest, including a pointillistic opening that builds to a driving but gentle rhythmic nodule, conjuring the title’s weather. Dissonance is created largely through suspensions in an otherwise tonal environment. The suggestion in the program note that the piece is a commentary on climate change, while it may alas have been what the composer intended, trivializes the poet’s mordant reflection on war’s destruction and the veil that nature discreetly throws over it.

As a kind of interlude and scene-changer, while the chorus came down from the loft, Christensen performed his only solo for the day, Arvo Pärt’s *Mein Weg hat Gipfel und Wellentäler*, from 1989. It was inspired by a poem by the Egyptian-French-Jewish poet Edmond Jabès about the vicissitudes of life, of which he had seen quite a few, having been among the Jews expelled from his native country during the Suez crisis of 1956. Pärt’s piece uses linear and rhythmic devices, with a strong rhythmic pulse and clearly articulated motivic cells. Christensen’s execution was exemplary, in music requiring notable virtuosity, with rich and varied coloration and registrational contrasts. The cresting and ebbing waves deriving from Jabès’s imagery were vividly conveyed.

The chorus, now assembled on stage, began the third set with Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s snarky “Die Ballade vom toten Soldaten,” (Ballad of the Dead Soldier), dating

from 1929, in which officialdom exhumes a fallen soldier's remains and trots them about town to show him off as a war hero. The singers charged through its 19 largely strophic stanzas with gusto. It might have been a mistake to sing in the original German instead of in Eric Bentley's fine translation (amended in some particulars by Lester) printed in the booklet, as that and the choral setting had the effect of neutralizing some of the acid one comes to expect from these Weill-Brecht collaborations.

Mark Zuckerman's contemporary (no date was given) a cappella arrangement of Holocaust victim Avrom Brudno's tune for "Unter dayne vayse shtern" (transliterations from Yiddish are a bit tricky—this would be pronounced identically to the German "Unter deine weiße Stern" but the rest of the text, by Holocaust survivor Avrom Sutzkever, needs to be transliterated to catch the dialectal pronunciations) seemed oddly Victorian for the anguished and haunted poetry, though it built to an emotional crest, well conveyed by the chorus. It was ingeniously, if jarringly, paired with "Wie liegt die Stadt so wüst" by Rudolf Mauersberger, setting text from Jeremiah in response to the firebombing of Dresden. This event, incidentally, was Churchill's deliberate revenge for the Germans' bombing of Coventry, thus tying this piece together with the Britten (written to commemorate the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral), as a kind of funhouse-mirror image. Mauersberger's music is, eerily, more affecting than Zuckerman's, with a big peak on "Warum willst Du unser so gar vergessen," but the thought of Party member Mauersberger wailing thus is a bit wince-inducing. One feels the more generalized sense of loss and waste in Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, but perhaps Mauersberger's regrets are too specific to merit our pity. Vonnegut tried in *Slaughterhouse Five*, but his perspective as an American victor was different and altogether less self-serving.

The stage business of processional, the chorus moving back to the loft, was accomplished with a curious rendition of Sibelius's hymn from *Finlandia*, a work written in protest of the Russification of Finland, but here using an insipid hymn text; audience participation was here requested and, in at least one case, grudgingly acquiesced.

Herbert Howells (1892-1983) is an unjustly neglected British composer, student of Stanford and Parry, known mostly now for church music and as the teacher, at the Royal College of Music, of such later luminaries as Robert Simpson, Gordon Jacob and Imogen Holst. The death of his son from polio at age nine in 1935 profoundly affected his music thereafter, even into *Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing*, written in 1964 to commemorate the death of John F. Kennedy. It begins with an invocation of Anglican chant, and then of medieval modality (open fourths and fifths), with each verse (there are eight) growing richer and more modern in sound. The chorus was vividly sympathetic to this superb piece, though the acoustics of the church militated against clarity in the polyphonic passages.

Five of the eight movements (the ones corresponding to the standard Mass ordinary) of Arvo Pärt's *Berliner Messe* comprised the closing. From its compositional date of 1990, one would expect this Mass to have something to do with the fall of the Berlin Wall the previous year, but no: it was commissioned for the 90<sup>th</sup> "Katholikentag," a biennial festival organized by Catholic laity in German-speaking countries. Though lying completely outside the concert's organizing theme, it's nevertheless lovely. Most

commentary on it stresses its musical ties to Pärt's "tintinnabular" compositional technique (one voice limning arpeggios, another going stepwise, usually in stately tempi), but to our ears the setting here is more conventional and less "holy minimalist" than that. The Gloria introduces some mild syncopations, and the Credo is folk-like in its directness, in a way suggestive of Virgil Thomson (and thereby offering retrospective clarification to Thomson's mystifying triadic repetitions) The Sanctus/Benedictus offered subdued and gentle rocking rhythms punctuated by small dissonances, while the *Agnus Dei*'s angelic tones, off-center counterpoint and crystalline isolation gave way in the final chords to a lush but solemn affirmation. The chorus and Christensen were impeccable.

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