MUSICAL SETTINGS OF WAR TEXTS IN TWO TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH CHORAL WORKS

Part 1

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When music combines with words, it creates an increasingly powerful effect, as the music enriches text in a variety of ways, enhancing and coloring its meaning, or creating irony. Music set to texts about war is already weighty and descriptive, inherently imbued with intense, horrific, penetrating images. Compositions written to sacred texts, especially those intrinsically associated with formalized religion, are already associated with spirituality, God, and things divine and inspirational. The combination of weighty war texts with sacred texts creates a dynamic, compelling composition, that is best observed in two remarkable British choral works by preeminent composers Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten.

Vaughan Williams and Britten each composed works that made a statement against war—works they believed could, and would, influence humankind for the better. These established masterworks of the choral and orchestral genres are rich with intriguing examples of how music portrays the graphic, poetic images of war and yet intermingles peaceful, spiritual, and/or formalized religious texts. A careful study of these works reveals how music breathes disturbing life into poignant poetry mixed with traditional texts of the Roman Catholic Church in a way that illumines both. Each composer was striving, through music, to intensify a message to the world about the evils and horrific impacts of war, hoping that by capturing the attention of humanity, they could change it for the better.

Dona Nobis Pacem by Ralph Vaughan Williams and *War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten share significant similarities. Both Vaughan Williams and Britten composed opulent works that couple antiwar poetry with texts from the Roman mass. These works extol neither war nor religion; rather, they condemn war's brutality and destruction, confronting violent, intentioned death squarely while condemning a religion that would condone such atrocities.

Both works are multi-textual, employing portions of the Roman Catholic liturgy in Latin and antiwar poetry, speeches, and Scripture in English. Vaughan Williams's work includes *Agnus Dei* from the Roman Mass combined with war poetry by Walt Whitman, a poet who lived and worked as a nurse during the American Civil War. It also incorporates portions of Scripture and an antiwar speech by John Bright. This piece was written in 1936 as an attempt to warn society of an impending World War II.[1]

Britten's *War Requiem*, on the other hand, was written in 1962 as a requiem for those who had died in war, and it served as a stark condemnation of church and society. In some ways it is considered a requiem for war itself. In addition to using the Latin *Requiem for the Dead* (*Missa Pro Defunctis*), Britten's piece contains poems by Wilfred Owen, a poet who died just days before Armistice Day while serving in World War I. These seemingly disparate texts intertwine, alternate, and poignantly color one another; the music underscores and highlights meanings of each, complementing and reinforcing them.

Regarding Britten's contribution, in the *Times*, William Mann described it as "the most masterly and nobly inspired work" Britten had composed to date, going on to say that "one could wish that everyone in the world might hear, inwardly digest and outwardly acknowledge the great and cogent call to the Christian life, proclaimed in the *Requiem*."[2] Britten himself once admitted, "I suppose *War Requiem* is the piece I hope will be remembered longest. But that is not because of the music, it is because of the message contained within, which I hope will be used for many years to come."[3] Peter Shaffer called Britten's work "the most impressive and moving piece of sacred music ever to be composed in this century."[4]

Since both men were significant British composers who lived in relative geographical and chronological proximity, it is safe to conclude that Britten was acquainted with his predecessor's work. One might even reason that *Dona Nobis Pacem* served as a model for Britten's work or exerted a degree of influence on it. However, "[t]here is no mention of *Dona Nobis Pacem* in Britten's published letters or diaries from the 1930s."[5] As a result, it is impossible to know for fact whether or not Britten's *War Requiem* was directly influenced by Vaughan Williams's work.

Choral Music as a Vehicle for Poetry in *Dona Nobis Pacem* and *War Requiem*

It is clear that both Vaughan Williams and Britten selected and carefully edited their texts for content, structure, and impact before crafting the music. Both of these works are polytextual, interweaving traditional texts of the church with antiwar poetry. The distinctive nature of these poetic texts and the way in which the composers edited them created a unique character for these works, informing and influencing compositional decisions.

Britten went to considerable lengths in selecting and editing texts from the Requiem Mass and Owen's poetry. For example, "*Strange Meeting* has numerous pencil annotations and erasure markings, far exceeding any other poem in the volume, which shows the extent to which Britten was at pains to refashion this text to his own purposes."[6] A similar amount of attention was given to his copy of the Latin text.[7]

Unlike Britten, Vaughan Williams relies principally upon the poetry of Whitman throughout his work, setting but a singular phrase from the Roman mass, "Dona nobis pacem," which recurs throughout the work. Vaughan Williams also appropriates sections of the New Testament book of Luke in a Christmastide moment—a moment absent from Britten's work. Like Britten, he intersperses the Latin text with the antiwar poetry, affecting both. To reinforce the impact of the Latin text, he set it to a recurring, quasi-chromatic musical theme, creating a subliminal effect some-

thing like a *leitmotiv* (Figure 1).

Benjamin Britten was a lifelong pacifist, as evidenced in his letters. His choice of a requiem mass, customarily a burial mass for the dead, would not, in and of itself, denote a work of pacifism. However, by alternating and combining sections of the requiem mass with graphic war poems written by a witness to World War I, Britten conveys a vivid diatribe against war, coupled with a blatant condemnation of the Church. The *War Requiem* was no reassuring burial mass but rather an intense warning to all who might hear it. Comparing it to other settings of the *Requiem* text, Mervyn Cooke states that the piece breaks new ground "in its daring juxtaposition of vernacular poems and Latin liturgical texts, and the bleak portrayal of man's inhumanity offered by the Owen poems seriously undermines the stylized religious phrases of condolence and consolation voiced by the words of the *Missa pro defunctis*."[8]

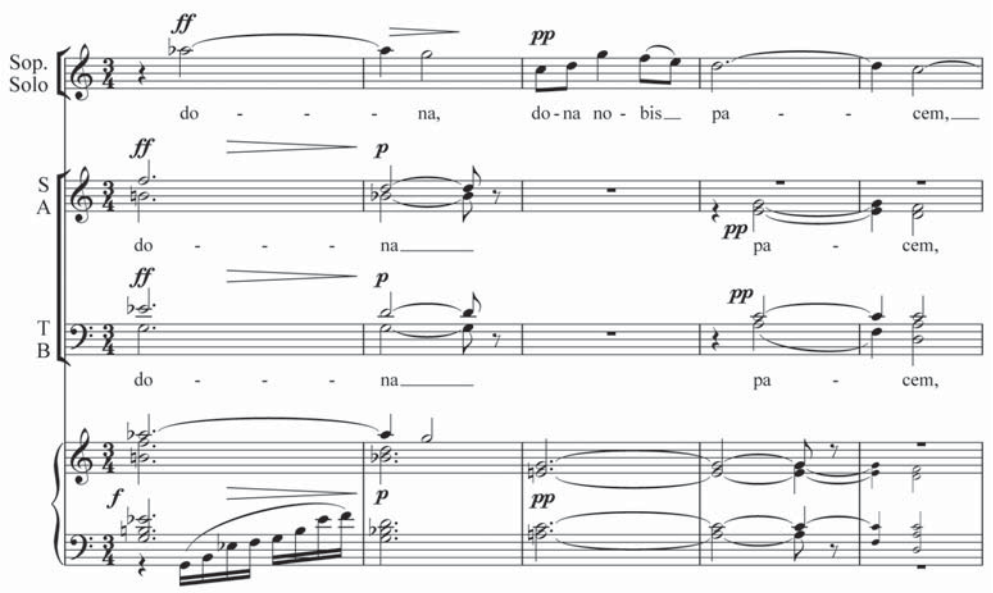

Figure 1. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 7 measures after Rehearsal 1.

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Britten made his pacifist position clear by associating certain words with specific musical textures. He set the *Requiem Mass* in original languages (Latin and Greek) for full chorus with predominant (operatic) soprano solo, historically traditional choices for example *Requiems* by Verdi, Mozart, Faure, and Donizetti. In contrast, he set the poetry of Wilfred Owen—English poems that articulate sentiments of soldiers, eyewitness accounts, and personal reflections about war—for tenor and baritone soloists and chamber orchestra.

The tenor and baritone soloists often represent soldiers of opposing sides, for example. Vaughan Williams employs the soprano soloist in a similar fashion, which is to say exclusively for the Latin text, consistent with traditional oratorio and requiem settings. The textural choice of chamber orchestra in the Britten work lends a transparent, personal quality to these sections, while Vaughan Williams simply thins out his orchestration for portions of soloistic writing. At times, the soloists function with little or no instrumental support. Britten included a distinctive third textural choice—a boys' choir, set to portions of the *Requiem* text—symbolizing innocence and purity. Britten's specific instructions that they be separated from the other forces indicates more than a symbolic distancing in regard to their function; they represent the innocent victims of war and voices of generations yet to be tragically forfeited in such conflicts. The boys' voices carry through the dark, thick textures of the full chorus, dramatic soprano, and orchestra and over and around the settings for tenor and baritone soloists with chamber orchestra. They float with an ethereal, cathedral-like tone accompanied by a small organ—an instrument immediately linked with traditional religion.

Dona Nobis Pacem (1936): Background to the Work

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) has been acclaimed as one of England's most important composers and is credited with reviving (and internationalizing) English music in the twentieth century. Although Vaughan Williams infrequently quotes folk music in *Dona Nobis Pacem*, his style is well known for appropriation of folk themes and for folklike qualities

imbued with a sound of melancholy, spaciousness, and pastoral, lyric, and serene sentiments. These qualities inherently lend distinctive shadings to antiwar poetry.

Although widely considered one of Vaughan Williams's greatest works, surprisingly little has been written about *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and nothing of analytical, empirical substance. This is indeed puzzling, given the stature of this composer and the importance of this particular work in his opus. One can only conclude that for various reasons, other works have overshadowed this one in stylistic analyses.

Dona Nobis Pacem was composed in the years before World War II as an artistic attempt to help avoid the coming war. It was commissioned for the centenary of the Huddersfield Choral Society, written in 1936 and premiered at the prestigious Three Choirs Festival in 1937. It was to be performed again in 1939, a performance that ironically had to be cancelled as war broke out across Europe, realizing the composer's worst fears and allowing his warnings to go unheeded.

"Dona nobis pacem" [Grant us peace] is a text extracted from the *Agnus Dei* of the Roman mass and a singular Latin text that pervades and unifies this work. It is significant that this is the only text from the mass that appears in the work. The vast majority of text that Vaughan Williams selected was the antiwar poetry of Walt Whitman. He borrowed from himself in this work, including setting of a Whitman poem titled, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" that was written between 1911 and 1914. Britten also borrows from himself with a fugue he wrote in setting "Quam olim Abrahae" in 1952 for a canticle titled "Abraham and Isaac."

The Whitman poems selected by Vaughan Williams yield a mixture of messages and wide array of emotional colors for musical setting. "Beat! Beat! Drums!" is an angry, sarcastic poem filled with bitterness toward war; it is considered by some scholars to be a parallel to Britten's *Dies Irae*, due to its violent, unforgiving, and threatening nature. It personifies the relentless realities and rhythm of war—its autonomous and seemingly self-prolonging, insidious life span. The harsh realities of war affect everyone in this poem. No one escapes its mockery and violence—not businesses, houses, or children.

Here again is a parallel to the Britten work: the innocents are children, referenced as victims, much like the presence of a boys' choir in *Requiem*. The other poems of Whitman excerpted in this work contrast with "Drum Taps." They are "Reconciliation" and "Dirge for Two Veterans" and are intensely intimate and personal. "Reconciliation" is uttered by one solder who has killed another; he recognizes his own humanity in the one he has slain and the value of the man he has killed in a moment of personal revelation and introspection. "Dirge for Two Veterans" is a reflection of a father and son who have died together in battle and are being placed in two coffins, side by side, in the ghostly moonlight. These poems distinctly parallel Britten's usage of Owen's poetry. Much of the most intimate text in Vaughan Williams's work is sung by the baritone soloist, a textural choice similar to Britten's setting of Owen's poetry for male voices.

To these, Vaughan Williams added excerpts from Scripture and an admonitory speech made by John Bright in the British House of Commons during the Crimean War of the 1850s. The scriptural sources include words of the prophet Jeremiah pleading for a balm amidst great famine and words of comfort and hope from the book of Daniel: "Fear not, peace be among thee, be strong." Vaughan Williams ultimately chooses to set the words of St. Luke uttered during the Christmastide message of the Christmas heritage, "Peace, good will toward men." This traditional message of hope and goodwill finds itself near the end of the work, after Whitman's sentiments are concluded. Alternating with these texts, the mass text, "Dona nobis pacem," recurs, sung by the soprano then joined by the choir, underscoring the composer's prayer for the world.

In comparison, Britten incorporates no Scripture at all. The only sacred text he sets is from the requiem mass; the only other text is the language of Owen. Vaughan Williams, in his choice of texts and his structural placement of them, delivers a decidedly different message than Britten: his is one of warning, caution, fervent prayer, and hope, while Britten's is one of a condemnation of war and a church that condones it.

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The Relation Between Music and Text

Dona Nobis Pacem

Vaughan Williams's *Dona Nobis Pacem* opens with the briefest of introductions: a piercing unison D from the woodwinds and strings, followed by an harmonic device employed frequently

by the composer in this work—an inverted seventh chord. This chord occurs outside of its traditional function and without typical resolution, creating a somewhat unsettled harmonic environment. On top of this harmonic underlay, the soprano soloist enters on a chant-like melodic motive set to the text *Agnus Dei*, customarily the final section of a Latin mass.

The complete text translates: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us, grant us peace." The last few words, "dona nobis pacem," serve as recurring text in the work, and the corresponding melodic motive also recurs throughout, becoming a unifying theme musically and poetically. Just as the Catholic mass is a celebration of the Eucharist (the Last Supper), the *Agnus Dei* represents Christ on his way to the cross; the Lamb of God is indeed the "sacrificial lamb." How fitting that Vaughan Williams should choose this text for an antiwar theme: Christ serves as a symbol that sacrificial lambs will indeed be lost.

This theme finds its way into the Britten work as well. Britten borrows this particular text from the mass and interpolates it into his *Requiem* with intention, and he uses texts from Wilfred Owen that specifically refer to Christ being "sacrificed" on the battlefield.

Vaughan Williams's melodic motive for this text signifies that this text is sacred: the chant-like motive connecting this text with the traditional church is clear and deliberate, and the leap of a fourth is ever present, outlined in the melody. Yet, the harmonic setting of instability and dissonance clearly colors the opening of the work in a distressing fashion. Polytonal effects occur as Neapolitan sixth chords hover over a pedal tone (G) between suspended tones from the soloist, chorus, and orchestra. Vaughan Williams consistently elects to write choral extensions in unusual voicings without resolutions that would characterize a given word or section of text as peaceful or settled. Figure 1 contains this type of writing.

The soprano soloist soars above the orchestra and chorus, as is traditional in a mass or oratorio. Her voice is finally ethereal in nature, rising and falling in melodic contour as a pleading prayer, descending into what one anticipates will be a peaceful resolution. Her melody ascends and reiterates melodic motives and text that serve as shrill pleas for peace. The melody culminates in a bitonal allusion—the E♮ set directly against the open fifth A♭ and E♭, finally reaching agreement as the music segues into battlefield rhythms (Figure 2).

On the heels of this opening passage, the chorus enters, reiterating the soloist's theme first in imitative entrances, then in clashing D♭ major chords that strike against a G pedal tone with rising, surging motives in the orchestra (the composer often incorporates this sort of call-and-response). In this opening section, the chorus enters briefly in imitative responses to the soprano's chant. Then, the dynamics suddenly escalate to *forte* and the orchestration becomes more dense, clashing chords reiterating the text ("Grant us Peace"), represent-

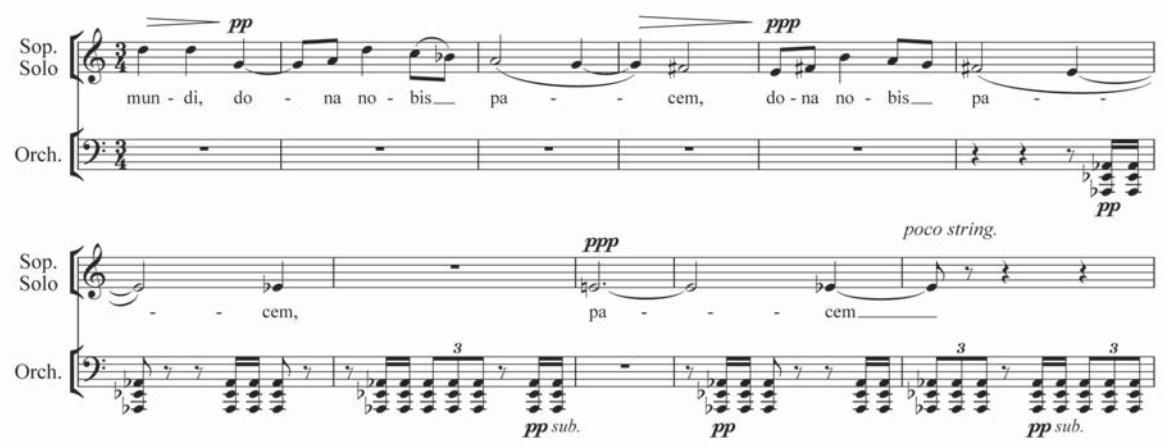

Figure 2. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 4 after reh. 2.

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ing a desperate cry for peace. Following the development of these concepts, the movement ends in a reflective, quiet way, with an unaccompanied soloist singing a version of the chant motive low in her range. Vaughan Williams incorporates several ascending fourths in the melody at this juncture, indicative of the purity in the sound of early church music (Figure 2). Beneath this decaying utterance for peace, the orchestra overlaps with rhythmic, martial motives in percussion and low strings, setting an ominous mood in anticipation of the first Whitman poem, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" The opening portion of music decisively conveys turbulence amidst this prayer-like text and chant; this is emphatically not peaceful serenity embodied in music.

One empirical note is germane here: if Britten's *Requiem* is distinguished by the unifying factor of the tritone, Vaughan Williams's is unified and characterized by his consistent use of extended chordal harmonies and the martial rhythmic figures of triplets and sixteenth notes, which represent battlefield sounds.

"Beat! Beat! Drums!"

These martial rhythmic figures, understated at first, build into the formal inception of the second movement. This overlapping and interweaving of ideas increases tension and creates a connected, seamless structure for this work. "Beat! Beat! Drums!" begins with an increasing use of rhythmic triplets and battlefield utterances from the orchestra. The A♯ blast from the horns, followed quickly by militaristic fanfares from the trumpets, creates bi-tonal effects: the lower strings and percussion outline an A♭ chord, while the horns and trumpets indicate A minor. The absence of thirds contributes to harmonic ambiguity, and half step differences between forces increase musical tension, coupled with insistent, rhythmic motives. Whitman's violent text combines with the musical setting to become a graphic depiction of the battlefield. The orchestral introduction grows as instruments are layered in and developed. One has a sense of movement as the army draws closer. The entrance of the chorus on chant-like rhythms signals a climax, commanding drums to beat and bugles to blow. This passage is set in open fifths, at first, one half step away from the orchestral key, highlighting a bi-tonal musical conflict. Short choral bursts, set *marcato* on repeated rhythmic motives, are placed in open and often parallel fifths and fourths for the choir, emulating battlefield sounds and instruments. Vaughan Williams's simultaneous use of varied devices portrays the chaos of impending battle (Figure 3).

Although melody, lyricism, and harmonic beauty may dominate Vaughan Williams's writing elsewhere, that is not the case here. Short, rhythmic motives and vocal lines imitating bugles are prominent and set syllabically, which

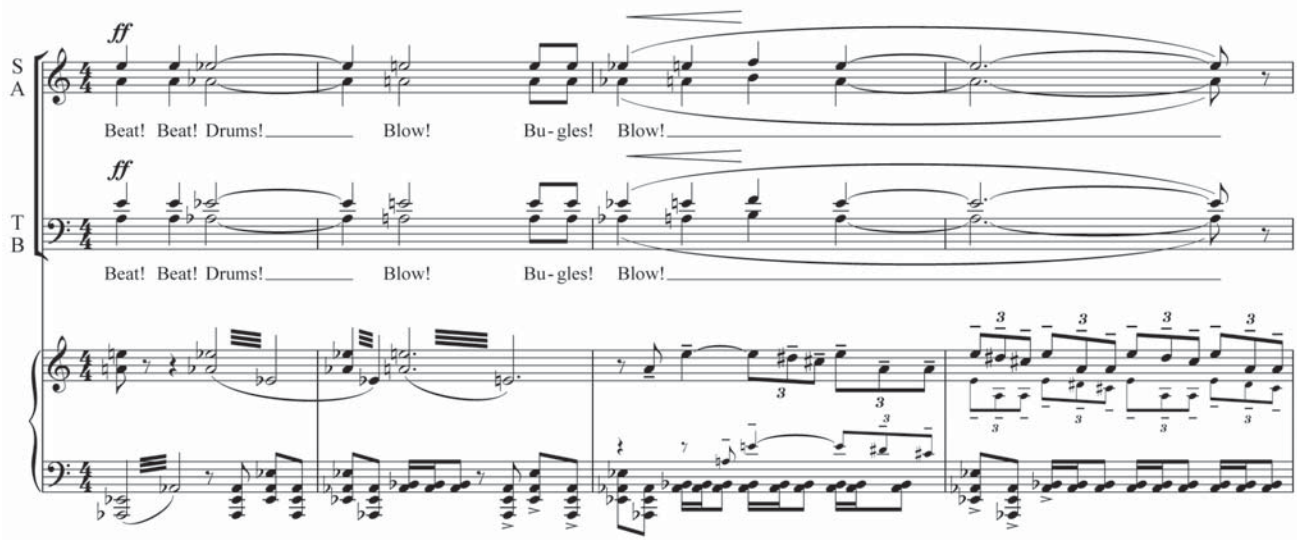

Figure 3. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* Movement II, 6 after beginning.

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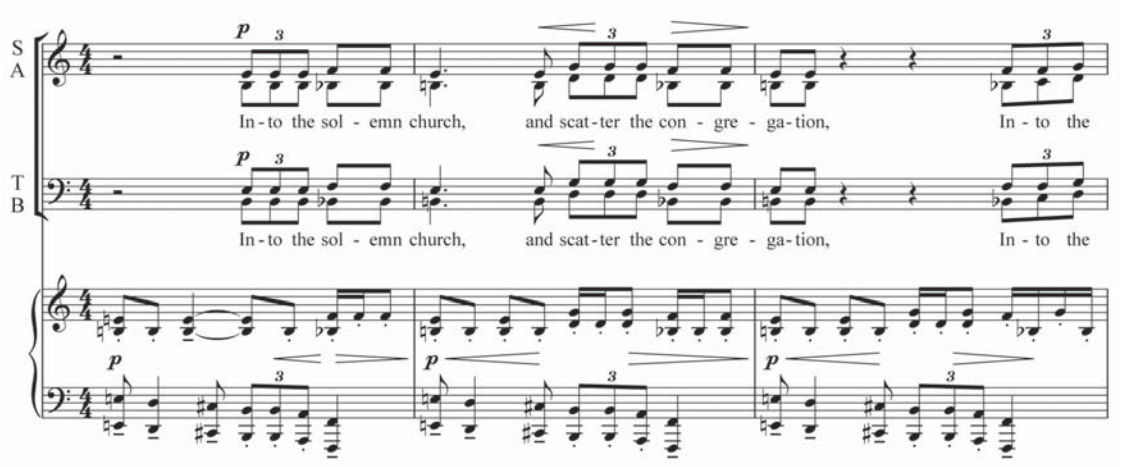

Figure 4. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 4 before reh. 4.

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gives a declamatory effect to the text. Vaughan Williams skillfully depicts the emotional sparseness of the affects of war by including open fourths and fifths, which are also indicative of militaristic brass writing. Notice in Figure 4 that he culminates motives with open fifths on specific words such as "church" and "congregation." He also places open fifths on words such as "peace" and "grain," making them hollow or dead. In the orchestra we find fanfare-like triplets with driving sixteenth-note passages, creating polyrhythms beneath the chorus, offering fanfare-like interludes, heightening the tension of an escalating battle.

Descriptive rhythms are set for onomatopoeic renderings such as "then rattle quicker, heavier drums" (Figure 5), and melismas are found in the voices that personify angry fanfares from bugles (Figure 3). The music joined to the poem becomes intensely realistic and immediate, and its effect is overwhelming and relentless. This is the darkest, most dramatic poem of Whitman found in the work, and the music in this movement is likewise the most

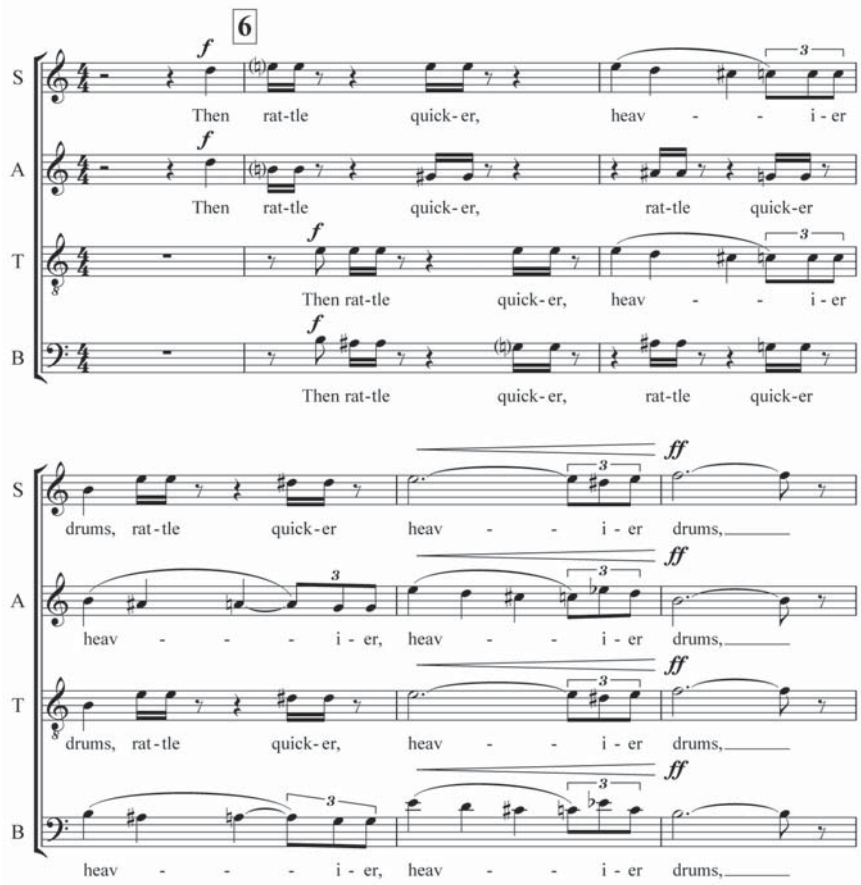

Figure 5. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 1 before reh. 6.

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rhythmically driving.

Melodic contour, lyricism, and colorful chordal extensions are abandoned in favor of short, declamatory, percussive fragments, punctuating bi-tonal allusions, driving rhythmic motives, and extreme tessiture, combined for dramatic delivery and affect. The words of Whitman serve in the work as the *Dies Irae* does in Britten's: there is an imminent sense of death and destruction to all. There is no escaping—no hope for peace or salvation. Akin to Britten, this hopelessness is heightened by the culminating tritones in the men's voices and in the final open fifths on the word "drums" (Figure 5).

This movement is essentially in song form (AABA). The contrasting B section sounds of repose, as text and music become more lyrical and linear. In it, the meter shifts to 2/2, and the key seems to settle in E minor momentarily, with melodic breadth and lyricism set in parallel fourths. Descending chromaticism, characteristic of historic laments, evokes sentiments of poignant grief and depicts a mother's anguish. The beauty of the music represents innocent victims mentioned in the text (an old man, a child, a weeper, a prayer), but Whitman informs us that none will escape the horrors of war. The peaceful respite is false, and the battle continues. Vaughan Williams frequently pairs voices for word-painting textures, as women sing of the "timid" and the "weeper," while men sing of "old men" and "young men" (Figure 6). A sudden return to the beating of the drums and chorus reminds us of an incessant battle. Vaughan Williams continues his syllabic writing but notably selects brief, dramatic melismas on particular words such as the "entreaties" of the grieving mothers and the "hearses" that await the dead. Figure 6 shows the end of this middle portion, with descending fourths, a hint of lyricism, and the type of rhythmic music that began the movement. This movement builds to a musical climax, much as with a battle, and winds down at the end with decreasing utterances of the drums as the sounds of the battle's decay.

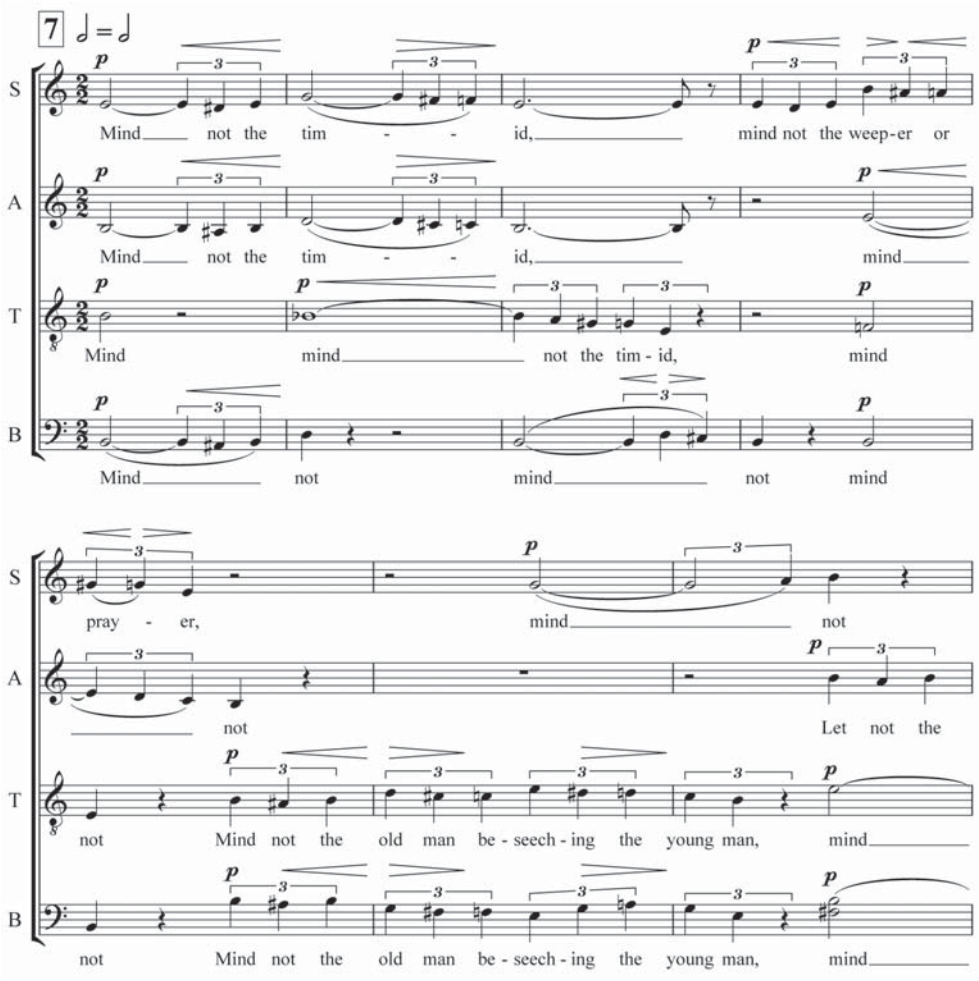

Figure 6. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* reh. 7.

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"Reconciliation"

The second and third movements of *Dona Nobis Pacem* elide, connected by militaristic triplet rhythms as the sound of diminishing drumbeats gives way to an eerie, ethereal theme in the violins, reminiscent of the opening *Agnus Dei* melodic contour. Here, Vaughan Williams selects an introspective and intimate poem by Whitman: "Reconciliation." To this very personal poetry, Vaughan Williams set music to alternating modal harmonies. Harmonic ambiguities are created by alternating C♮ versus C♯ and G♮ versus G♯, blurring the modes; Phrygian is the most prevalent one. The setting of this movement, for baritone soloist and transparent orchestration with minimal brass and percussion, is intensely personal and akin to Britten's setting of Owen's poetry that is also set for male soloists and chamber orchestra. In this regard, movement III in *Dona Nobis Pacem* is essentially an art song for soloist and choir.

Here, Britten and Vaughan Williams part company in a fashion: Vaughan Williams brings chorus and soloist together on Whitman's text regularly in his work; Britten waits until the very end to unite chorus and soloist, and then the male soloists join the Latin of the choir—the choir never utters the words of Owen.

The orchestra provides us with meaningful commentary to open this movement, playing "death chords" that are dissonant, consisting of added note chords and secundal harmonies, which provide an ominous attribute to a seeming calm after the storm; the serenity is tainted.

In stark contrast to the previous movement, the strings and woodwinds carry the music; brass and percussion are silent, as the battle has ceased for a time. The baritone soloist begins with a haunting, arioso passage on a melody that revolves around the tone B (Figure 7), and the choir later echoes the soloist's words and melody in a beautiful, exposed, unaccompanied setting.

There is warm, tranquil, musical coloring of text here. As Whitman refers to the "deeds of carnage that must in time be utterly lost," the music is lyric, serene, and eerily beautiful, harmonically static and lush, belying the death and destruction that surrounds this witness on the battlefield. Structurally, the sopranos then assume the lead, and the balance of the choir responds, culminating in ghostly imitation, even indicating the motion of "washing," to the text "wash again, and ever again, this soiled world." There is harmonic stasis as the "soiled world is washed." The soprano soloist again utters the text "Dona nobis pacem," an unset-

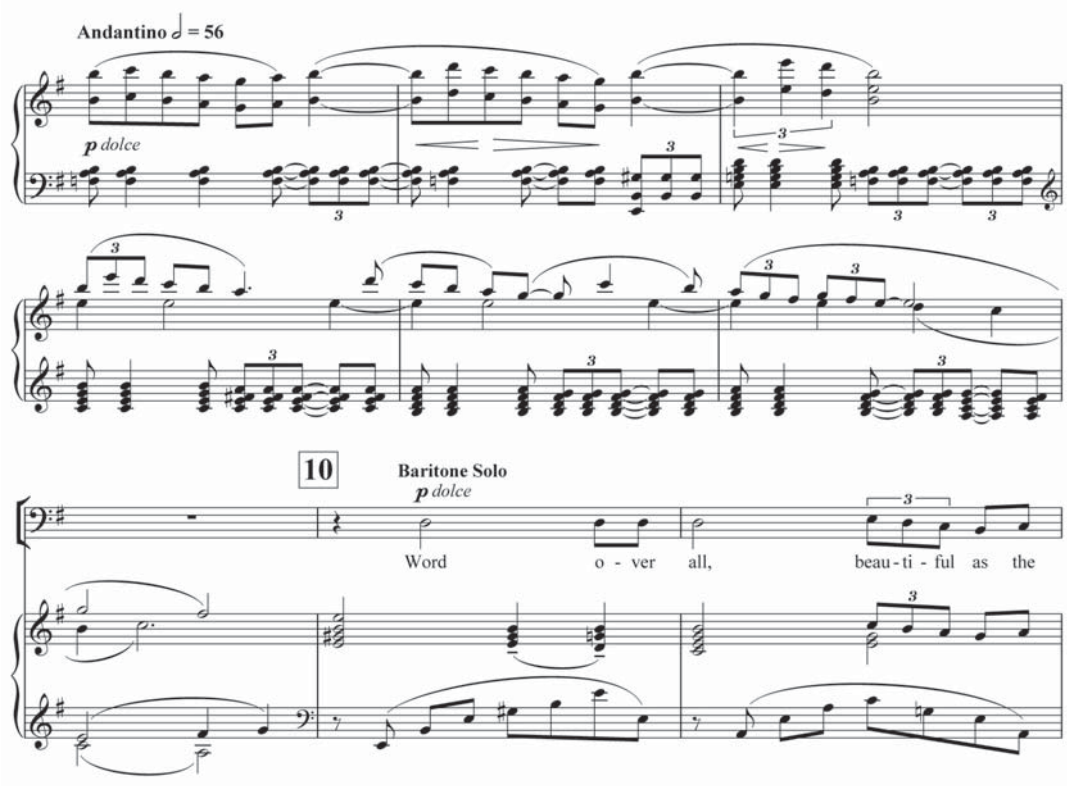

Figure 7. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* Movement III, beginning.

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tling end to this mournful, reflective section of music, the words on a series of descending minor thirds, moving away from the harmonic context. The choir finishes in E major, which would provide a serene conclusion to this movement, but the soloist descends through that key, ending on an F♮, a tone foreign to E major, disturbing its serenity. (Compare Figure 8 to Figure 3.)

In the third movement, Vaughan Williams sculpts a beautiful, lyric melody and static harmony and rhythmic movement that dramatically contrast with the martial, violent, incessant bugle-like motives of the second. The listener is led directly from the battlefield to the end of the battle to experience personal carnage and tragedy in the most intimate way. In "Reconciliation" the text appears three times: first in the baritone solo with orchestral accompaniment, then in the choir with strings and woodwinds, and finally for unaccompanied choir. The baritone solo reemerges with a recitative line, sparsely supported by the orchestra. It is here we learn that he has the revelation that his "enemy" whom he killed earlier that day is as "fine a man" as himself (Figure 5).

The complete text follows:

> Word over all, beautiful as the sky, Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost, That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again and ever again, this soiled world; For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead, I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near, Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

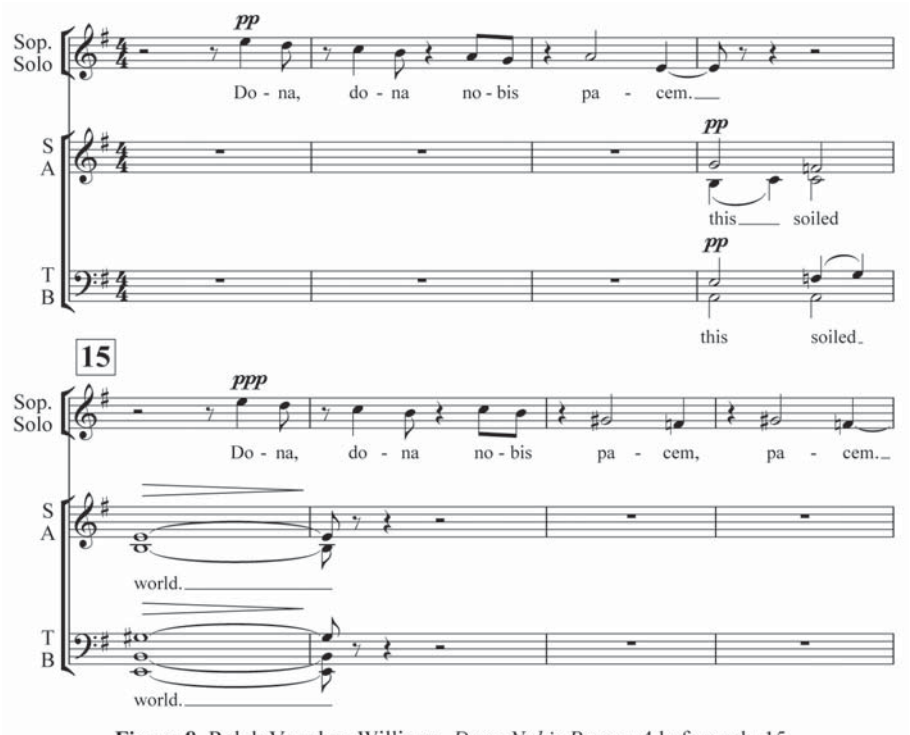

Figure 8. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 4 before reh. 15.

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"Dirge for Two Veterans"

The F♮ concluding the third movement becomes a continuous tone delivering us into the fourth movement, underscored with the return of militaristic, orchestral triplets, rhythmic utterances in a bi-tonal affect. This music serves as a sinister, dark procession as we move into another of Whitman's poems, "Dirge for Two Veterans." Here again, Vaughan Williams differs from Britten in his structural organization of the piece. Whereas Britten inserts complete textual and musical requiem segments between poems by Owen, Vaughan Williams appropriates but the single recurring line of Latin. Vaughan Williams also musically borrows from himself for this movement, introducing a setting of a work he wrote between 1911 and 1914. Here is heard a reiteration of war's drums but now in a low ostinato, as in a funeral procession. This movement is a slow, noble progression—a steady, plodding funeral march. The choral parts are set essentially in homophony, and the consonant and beautiful harmonies seem to indicate a sad beauty, even nobility (Figure 11).

Vaughan Williams's musical text painting becomes almost literal, as voice pairs and alternating voice parts indicate the two men "dropped" together, the rhythms and use of voice pairs creating an onomatopoetic portrayal of the men suddenly "dropping." The dotted rhythms again sub-

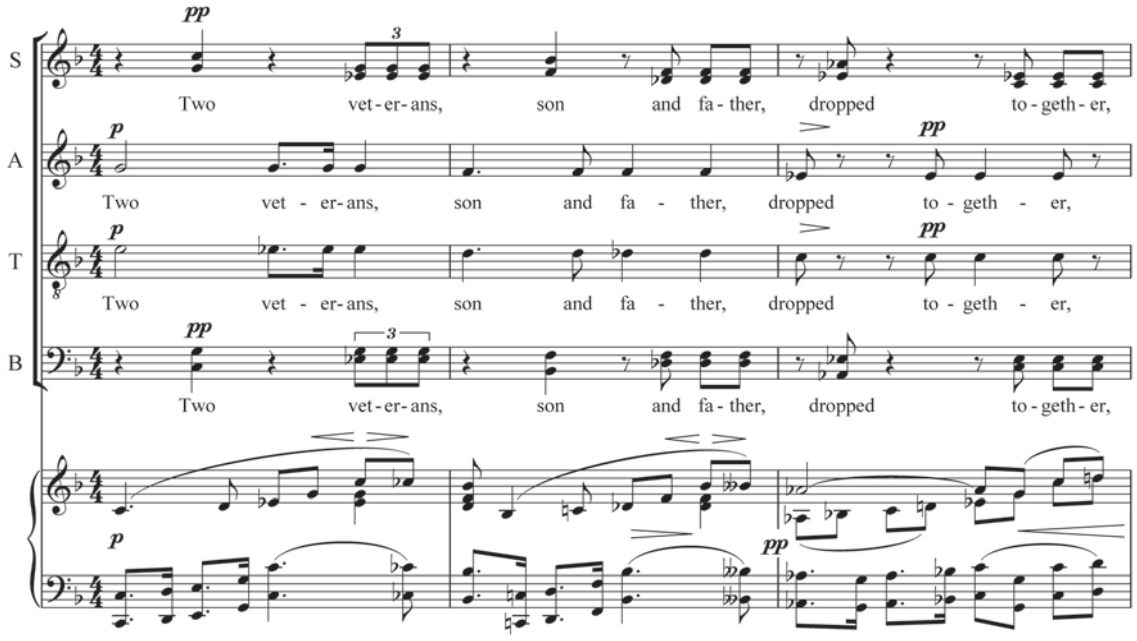

Figure 9. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 5 after reh. 22.

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tly underscore the vocal music in this military funeral march. There is also a subtle, ascending whole-tone scale in the orchestra, outlining the tritone (as with Britten), from A♭ to D♯, and the serene melody of the violins, harkening back to "Reconciliation" (Figure 9).

The scene found in the poetry is set by the music; it is nighttime, the moon is full and shining down, depicted in the ghostly sounds of the orchestra. Triplets find their way again into the orchestration as the departed process to their graves accompanied by a military dirge. Vaughan Williams uses the rather optimistic key of C major as choir and orchestra indicate the approaching of the "full-keyed bugles"—a key he uses also later in the work, at the end of the "Christmas" portion for the text "Good will toward men." The mode shifts momentarily to C minor, in typical Vaughan Williams style, to indicate "tears" but then mutates back to C major for nobility as "the great drums" pound. Modal shifts occur several more times, as the musical setting fluctuates between moments of grandiosity and mourning. Vaughan Williams peaks in D major momentarily (historically the "triumphant" key) as the "great convulsive drums strike…through and through." The choir echoes the sound of battlefield trumpets yet again, singing onomatopoetically on melodic fourths to the text, "Now nearer blow the bugles."

This section concludes with a powerful and uplifting orchestral brass interlude, as this "procession" reaches its peak, again in C major. Were it not for the ominous, foreboding nature of this work and the tragedy expressed in the poetry, one would feel inspiration and strength from Vaughan Williams's music. Instead, it is a skillful statement of musical irony. The procession halts momentarily, as Vaughan Williams suspends harmonic and rhythmic progression. The pounding drums pause as the graveyard spreads out before us in the mist, and witnesses to this scene halt and reflect on the overwhelming peacefulness of this time, place, and somber occasion.

This juxtaposition of serene reflection and underlying sorrow is brought to life with imitative entrances in the choir that outline a progressive series of seventh chords (major sevenths and/or dominant sevenths) to the text: "In the eastern sky upbuoying, the vast phantom moves, illumined. Tis some mother's large transparent face, in heaven brighter growing." The use of modality and repeated extended chords is typical harmonic language that Vaughan Williams uses to depict a strange, ironic

beauty—beauty that is colored by the essence of horror and destruction. In Britten's work, we find no such material as this; he gives little repose or implied serenity—instead, the tritone incessantly rules in his work (Figure 10).

The procession continues with the return of rhythmic drive with drums, as the chorus and orchestra build to a climax: "O Strong dead march, you please me!" The movement ends in a most somber tone, not with the Latin text with which the composer has concluded other movements, but with the chorus in a brief, homophonic statement for the two slain soldiers, "My heart gives you love." The orchestra provides reflection as the dirge concludes with intermittent drums and a restatement of the lyric theme. The movement ends on a low unison A, which seems to define the essence of the dirge.

This is the first pause in the entire work, but we move on after a brief respite into the words of John Bright. The figure below shows the beginning and ending of this movement—using the tone A as a fulcrum, culminating musically into the grave.

One final comment is pertinent here: As the melodic line weaves around the pitch A, essentially set in Dorian mode, the bass ostinato is built on the dominant tone of E. There is symbolism in the melodic line, as the tones wind around A and ultimately rest there, representing the father and the son who served opposing sides but end up in a mutual grave. These two souls, pitted against each other on the mortal plane, end in spiritual and musical unison (Figures 11 and 12).

The Angel of Death

John Bright's foreboding speech "The Angel of Death has been abroad" takes us into the next movement. The soloist picks up the dominant tone from the preceding key of A Dorian in a recitative-like motive, supported sparsely

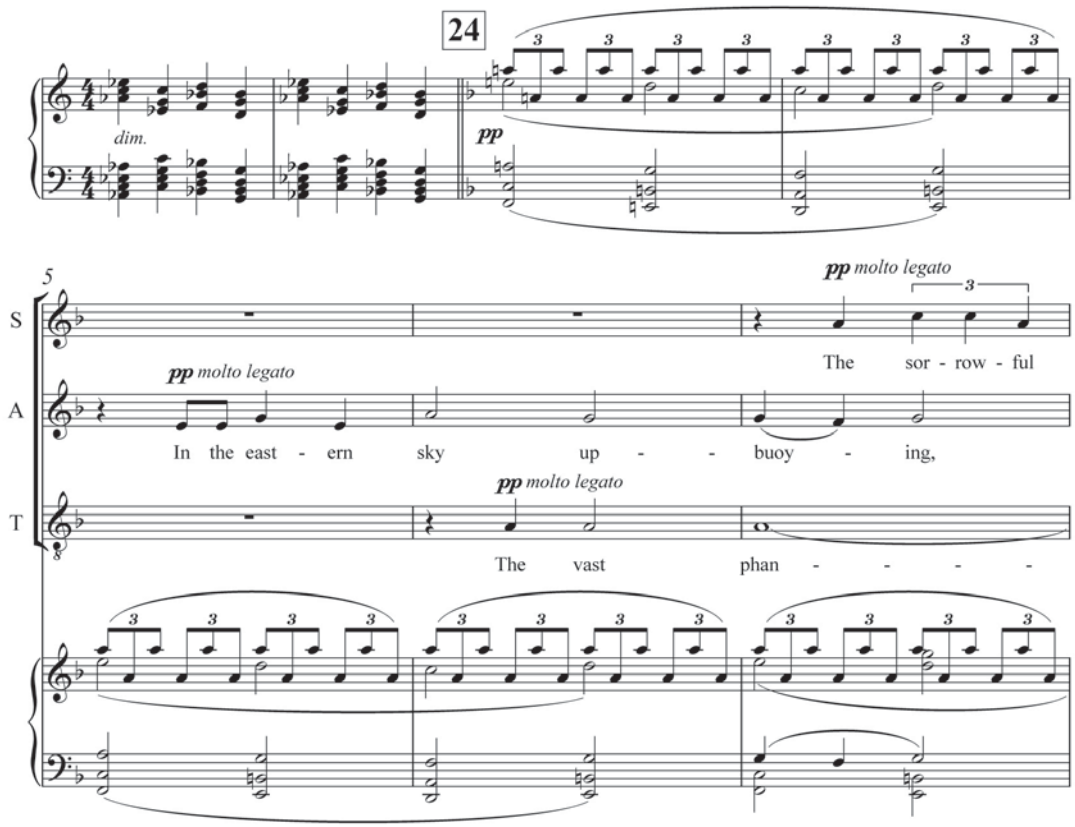

Figure 10. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 2 before reh. 24.

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by timpani and low *pizzicato* strings, indicating Phrygian mode. This is a quiet, personal, and powerful beginning to the final movement. This haunting, foreboding opening is interrupted suddenly and violently with a recurrence of the orchestral and choral material from the opening movement, again singing on A♭ minor chords against a G pedal (again the quasi-Neapolitan-sixth function, found on the lowered second) set to the text, "Dona nobis pacem." The soprano soloist soars over the top of chorus and orchestra, asserting dramatic suspensions and heightening tensions.

This moment in Vaughan Williams's *Dona Nobis Pacem* is similar to Britten's setting of *Libera Me* in the *War Requiem* in terms of its structural location, purpose, style, and impact. The writing here achieves a cataclysmic peak that denies the listener assurances of hope for peace. Also akin to Britten, the recurrence of dissonant materials is like the revisiting of the *Dies Irae* in the *War Requiem* in that it takes place at an unusual location structurally (late in the work), with a clear desire to drive home a point.

The chorus continues with words from the scriptures, "We looked for peace," set in canonic counterpoint that creates an unsettled journey toward a desired peace. This is set in voice pairs, representing people struggling unsuccessfully to find peace. The collective nature of this outcry is further emphasized by the fact that the entire section is a canon; men's voices follow women's voices in a constant, unrequited search for peace, progressing through the text, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" and "And we are not saved." The voices never achieve accord. Similarities to *War Requiem* are found here: Vaughan Williams outlines the tritone in the text, "The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan"; and constant

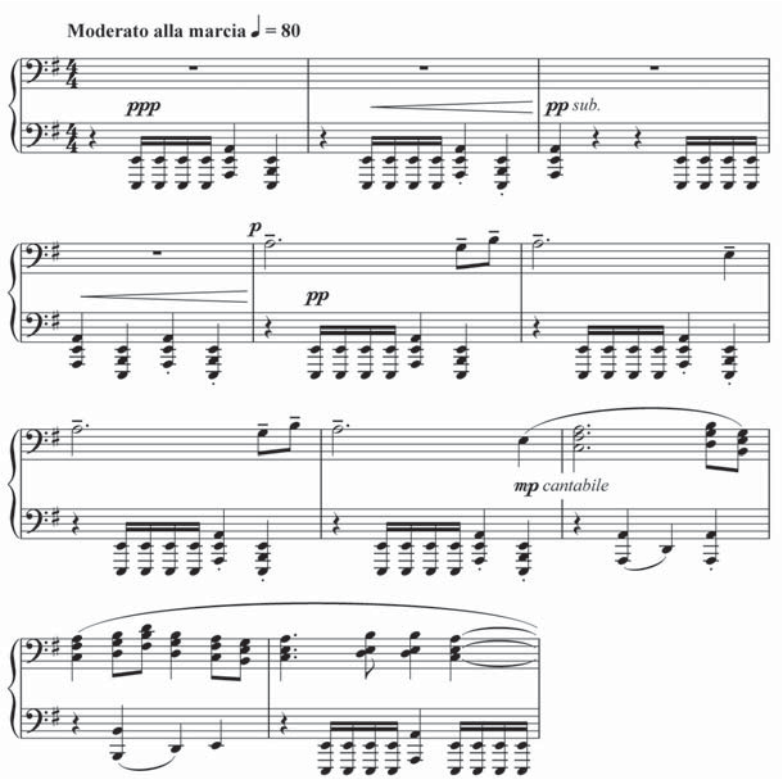

Figure 11. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* Movement IV, beginning.
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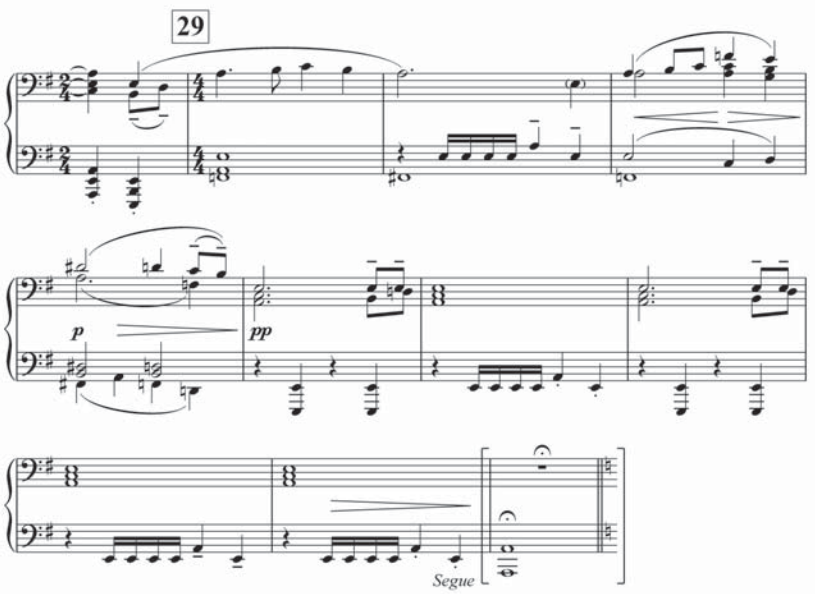

Figure 12. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 1 before reh. 29.
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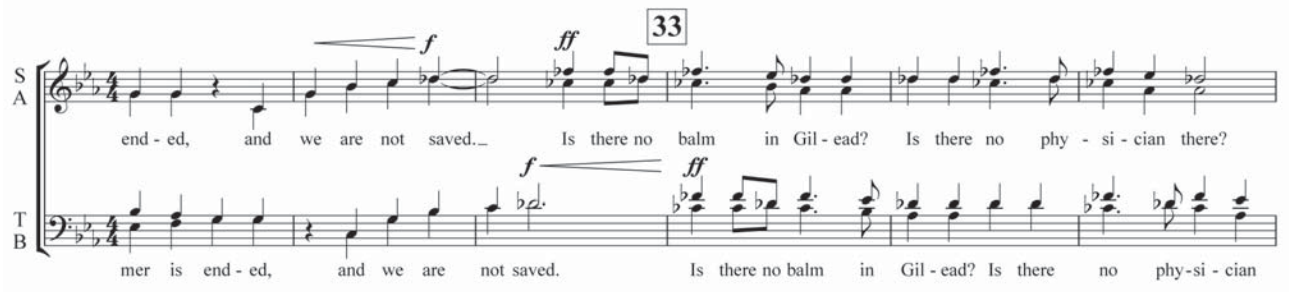

Figure 13. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 3 before reh. 33.

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chromaticism abounds throughout the section (Figure 13).

The orchestra slides into the rich key of D♭ major as the baritone soloist, now assuming the role of the prophet Daniel, proclaims, "O man greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee." This begins the final section of music that appears uplifting and hopeful. The words are optimistic and the music is strong and forthright, not tinged with irony or sarcasm. Here, music and text seem to reinforce hopefulness and strength. A rhythmic device common to Vaughan Williams is a quasi-hemiola function, as phrases are bracketed in 3/4 time within 4/4 measures, creating a sequence of shifting accents. These groupings are found set to texts like, "Open to me the gates of righteousness," and, "Let all the nations be gathered together." In each case, the shifting rhythmic accents lend themselves to movement. In one case the gates are opening; in the other, the nations are assembling. This rhythmic technique culminates, as it does historically, in a heightened intensity that drives toward final resolution. Vaughan Williams uses it in such fashion here, as the work is clearly approaching its conclusion structurally (Figure 14).

This section develops as a continuous escalation of optimism, using texts from several sources in Scripture and building into a Christmas-like section from the book of Luke that seems incongruous: "Glory to God in the highest, good will toward men." The music features full orchestra and chorus once again in a bright C major. The key Vaughan Williams used to depict "full-keyed bugles" he now uses to sing of "good will toward men." There are celebratory motives in the bells and chimes (reminiscent of church bells), and the meter is 3/4, creating a mood of cheerfulness and joy. Vaughan Williams seems, for the moment, to assure the world of peace. This movement shares several characteristics with Britten's *Sanctus*: including the use of several percussion instruments and references to the universal text "heaven

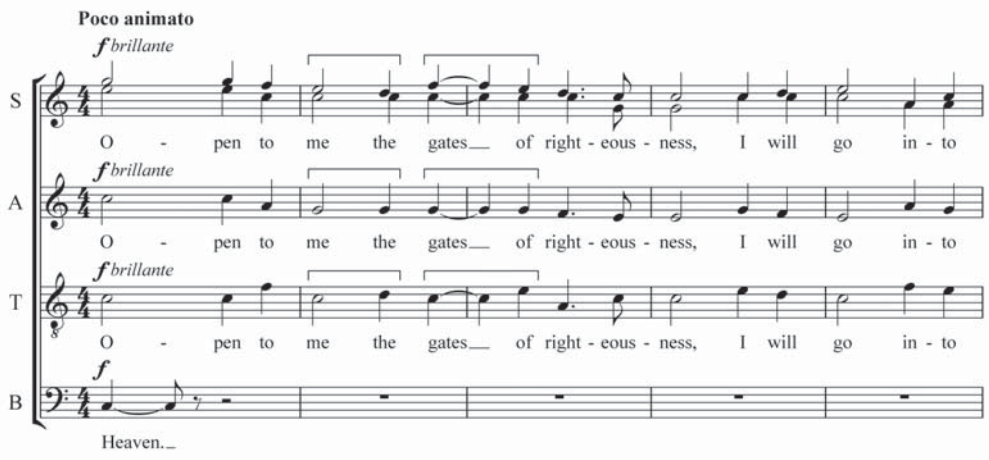

Figure 14. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* 6 before reh. 38.

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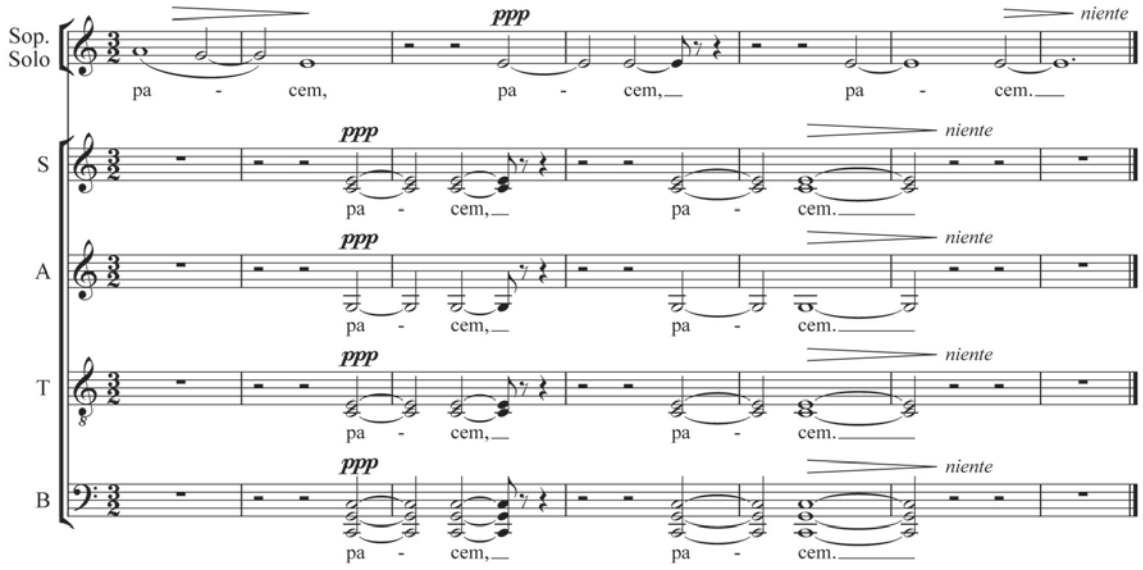

Figure 15. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem,* final 7 measures.

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and earth," albeit in differing contexts. Vaughan Williams, however, clearly reconciles himself to a more straightforward, celebratory approach.

The more upbeat nature of this movement may be indicative of optimism on the part of Vaughan Williams, hoping that the world might avoid war again. Ending this section with pleas from the choir—clearly the emotional and musical high point of the work—the text "Good will toward men" is repeated in the highest tessitura of the entire piece. However, these choral portions are overlapped and interrupted by the soprano soloist, who again soars overhead, reiterating her "Dona nobis pacem," sung at the end as at the beginning. Here, as the soprano utters the Latin text, the choir repeats "good will toward men," alternating with the soprano until the choir at last surrenders the English text, joining the soloist on her chant-like phrase in Latin. The final words from the soloist are set in plainchant, while the choir concludes in simple C-major triads, without melodic deviation or harmonic variation.

Dona Nobis Pacem's ending is unaccompanied—similar to Britten's. After an escalation consisting of full orchestra and choir fusing all forces to a climactic moment, the soloist finishes the work quite alone, settling somewhat restlessly on the third of the C-major triad. This magnificent work, with its drums, bugles, full chorus, operatic soprano, and powerful baritone, concludes on a single, unaccompanied note in utter simplicity. This seems to beg an ongoing question rather than offer a concluding statement.

Thus, this work begins and ends on a single musical note. At the beginning of the piece, it is a piercing, penetrating unison D in the woodwinds and strings; at the end, it is an exposed E, low in the soprano range, sung quietly and ethereally (Figure 6). The work begins, then, on a unison D, the seventh in an E7 chord, and concludes on an E, framing the entire work tonally (Figure 15).

Like *Dona Nobis Pacem*, Britten's War *Requiem* opens and closes relatively simply when compared to the rest of the work. As we will see in part two of this article, *War Requiem* opens with funereal bells on the tritone coupled with dirge-like quintuplet rhythms set in the low strings. In addition, Britten's monument to pacifism ends on an unaccompanied, relatively peaceful F-major triad (much like Vaughan Williams's ending on a C-major triad), and it is one of the rare times that Britten allows simple triadic harmony to appear in his work.

Part one of this article has focused on Vaughan Williams's work, offering comparisons to Britten's as appropriate. Part two will do the opposite, bringing Britten's *War Requiem* to the forefront.

NOTES

[1] As stated in the program notes in Robert Shaw's recording: "Often conceded to be the greatest choral work by Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem* was intended as a warning against the rising drums of war being heard across Europe in the mid-1930s." Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Robert Shaw, conductor Telarc 80479, 1998.

[2] John Evans, "Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*," *The Voice* 36, number 2, Winter, 2012–13, 21.

[3] Ibid., 23.

[4] Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, 2005, 79.

[5] Michael Steinberg, *Choral Masterworks, A Listener's Guide*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 88.

[6] Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, 2005, 29.

[7] Ibid., 33.

[8] Ibid., 53.

Sing Up! Membership Drive Results

Sundra Flansburg, Director of Membership Development

Thanks to the hard work of ACDA state and division leadership, and to many, many ACDA members, we added almost 2,000 new members during our first Sing Up! membership drive, which took place during September and October 2013.

To put that in perspective, at the close of our drive we had more members than we have had at any point since 2006. That's our highest membership in almost seven years—an overall increase of 10%.

That calls for some celebration! Many, many states worked very hard and increased their membership significantly. Six states in particular achieved at least 15% growth in Active membership: Idaho (30%), Connecticut (23%), North Dakota (22%), South Carolina (18%), New Mexico (16%), and Maine (15%).

Digging in a little, our student membership increased by an amazing 27%, thanks to a number of state leaders and college- and university-based members who did focused and personal outreach to students across the country. That growth came almost entirely from states who participated in our Student Membership Initiative: 39 states in all. Just imagine what could happen next year if every state participated!

Active membership—our bread and butter—increased by 8%, and 42% of those additions were through our Seeding New Membership Program, an initiative that offered states a fixed number of complimentary Active memberships to award. Each state's commitment when participating in that program was to (1) carefully select people who would be excellent new members and who had the potential to renew their membership once their complimentary year was expiring and (2) mentor those new members to ensure they are welcomed into ACDA and know the ways they can participate.

Are you seeing—as I am—some of the work we have ahead this year? It is exciting to think about the many ways we all need to welcome and engage our new members and show how much we value our loyal and experienced members. States have always been the leaders carrying that torch forward. At the national level, we will continue to work with ACDA state and division leadership to spark ideas and provide the vehicle for sharing those ideas among the states.

Because student membership—the future of ACDA—has special interests and needs, I will be working closely with our National R&S Chair of Youth and Student Activities, Amanda Quist, to focus on those members and ways we can continue to expand Student Chapters and other student-specific benefits. Our new mentoring program will be pilot tested this spring, and we plan to roll it out to states during the second half of the year. We are also working on ways to shine a spotlight on the work of student chapters.

Thank you to every member who contributed to an extremely successful first membership drive. It involved a team of hundreds, and we can all be proud of what we accomplished for ACDA and our profession.