

Music as Mirror

8 - The Music of Hope: Britten and the *War Requiem*

CATH

THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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09/M/JSL

7th October 1958

Dear Ben,

People at Coventry are hard at work now planning a big Festival of the Arts to coincide with the consecration of the new Cathedral in May 1962, and of course this is going to be an important National event, expected also to have European interest.

They invited me to serve on the Arts Committee and at last week's meeting discussed the special interest of commissioning a new choral and orchestral work. I was asked, on behalf of the Committee, to ask you in an informal and preliminary way, to think of this.

It is intended to form a special Festival Choir from the best voices of choirs in Coventry Diocese, and they will engage a professional orchestra. The new work they seek could be full length or a ~~potential~~ 30/40 minutes one: its libretto could be sacred or secular since there can be concerts both in the Cathedral and in the fine big Coventry Theatre (at which a new acoustic stage has recently been made for concerts by orchestras like the Halle).

The Committee will be very pleased if this great occasion could help to bring forth an important new work from you and, of course, it's a real pleasure to me to be asked to pass on their enquiry to you.

If you would like more information (though, of course, the Festival is only at the quite preliminary planning stage) I could try and get to London on one of the days when you are there for a chat about it, but meanwhile could you let me know how you feel about the plan in a general way.

Yours ever,

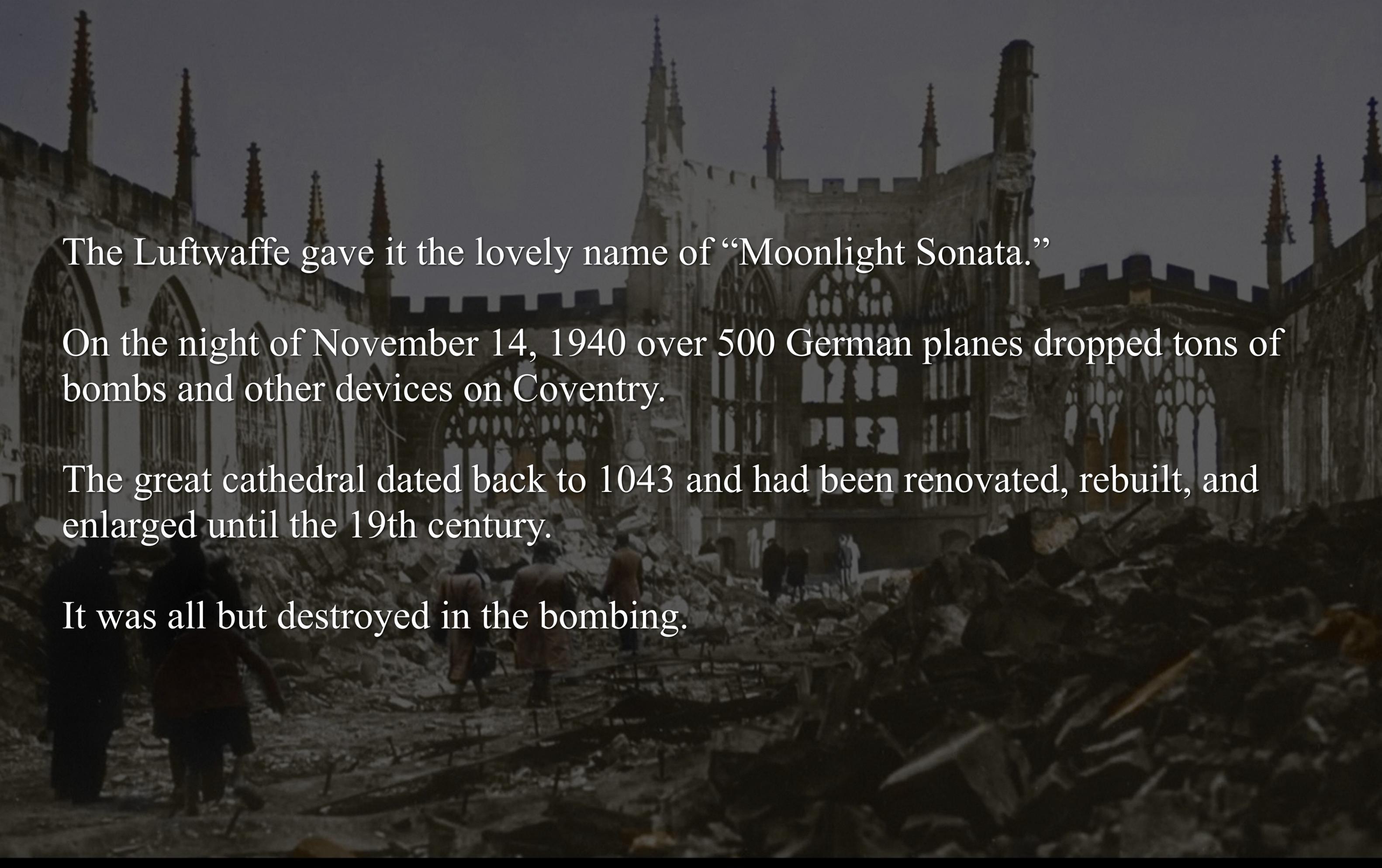
John

(John Lowe)

Benjamin Britten, Esq.,
The Red House,
Aldeburgh,
Suffolk.

bfc

*If you want a work, they will be v. pleased
if you would conduct it.
JL.*



The Luftwaffe gave it the lovely name of “Moonlight Sonata.”

On the night of November 14, 1940 over 500 German planes dropped tons of bombs and other devices on Coventry.

The great cathedral dated back to 1043 and had been renovated, rebuilt, and enlarged until the 19th century.

It was all but destroyed in the bombing.

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a Gothic cathedral in ruins. The image shows the skeletal remains of the building, with many windows missing and the roof structure exposed. Several people are seen walking through the rubble in the foreground, providing a sense of scale. The overall mood is somber and historical.

A new cathedral was to be a long time in coming, due to post-war austerity in Britain plus the pressure in an increasingly secular society not to waste badly-needed money on “useless” buildings.

But a new cathedral rose nonetheless. The winner of the architectural competition was Basil Spence, whose design incorporated the ruins of the old cathedral alongside the new.

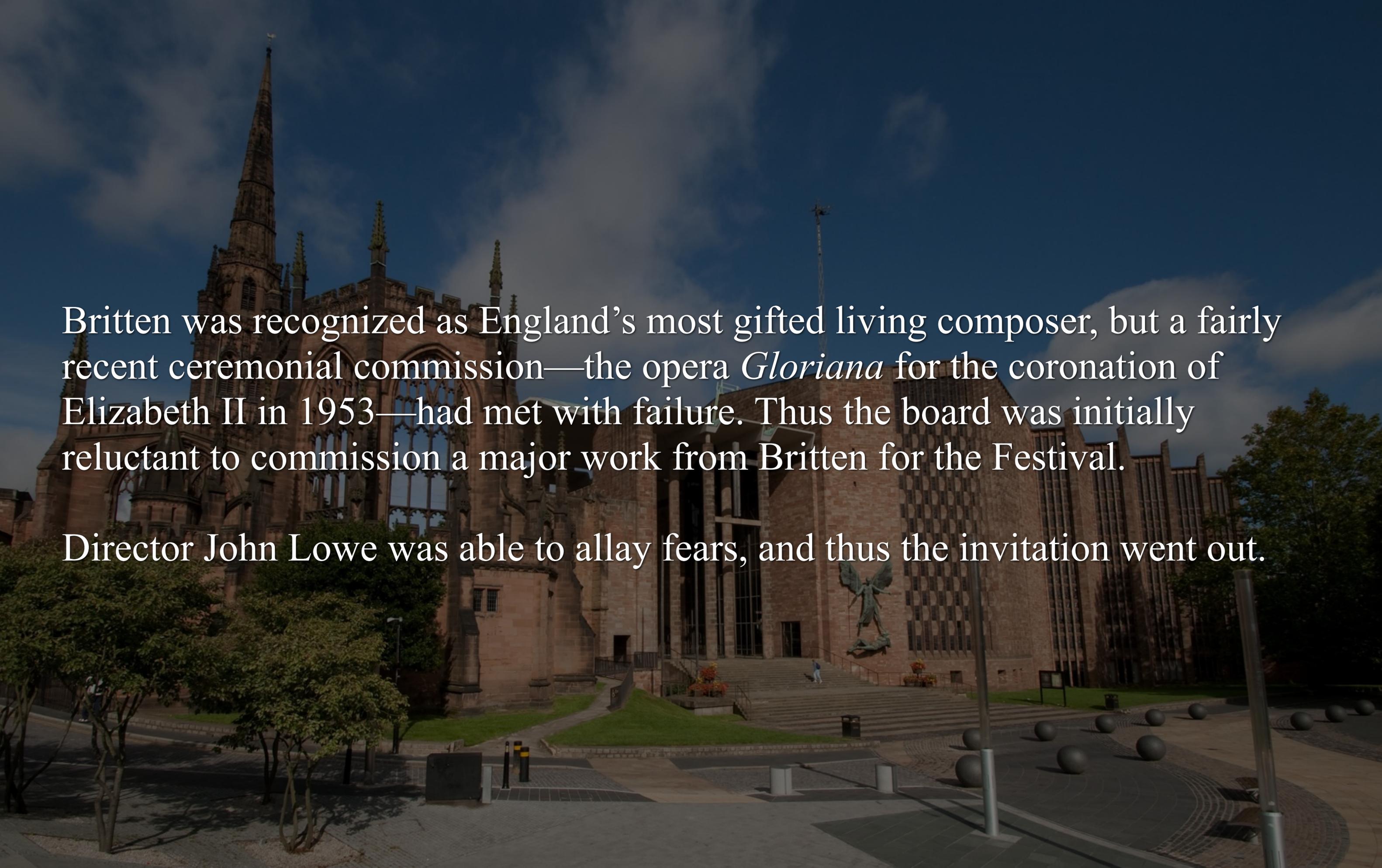




A festival was planned to commemorate the May 25, 1962 consecration of the new cathedral.

The Festival would include performances by the Berlin Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Opera House, Sadler Wells Opera, the Royal Ballet, and solo recitals by prominent artists.

The Festival also commissioned new works by Arthur Bliss, Ildebrando Pizzetti, and Michael Tippett.

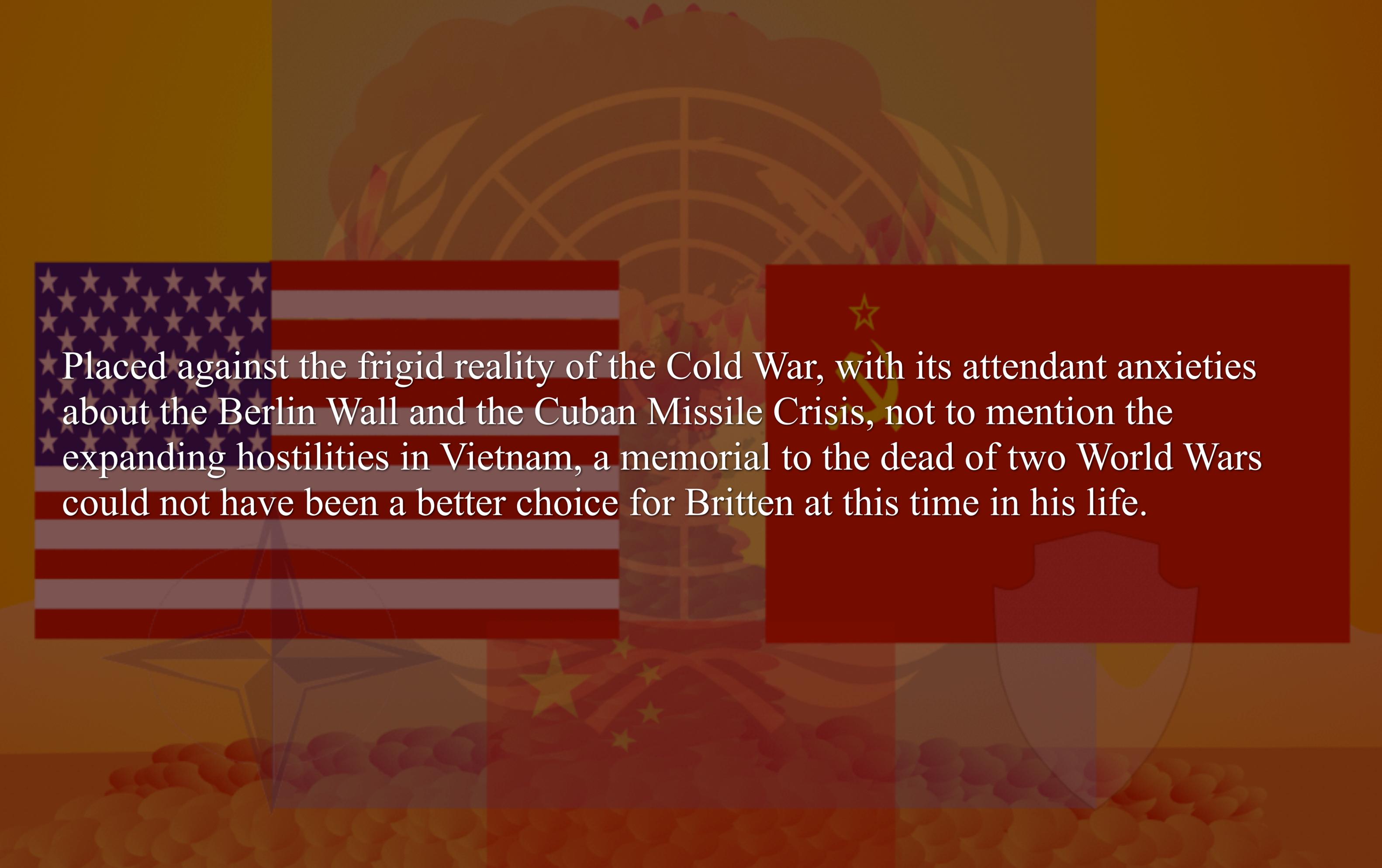


Britten was recognized as England's most gifted living composer, but a fairly recent ceremonial commission—the opera *Gloriana* for the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953—had met with failure. Thus the board was initially reluctant to commission a major work from Britten for the Festival.

Director John Lowe was able to allay fears, and thus the invitation went out.



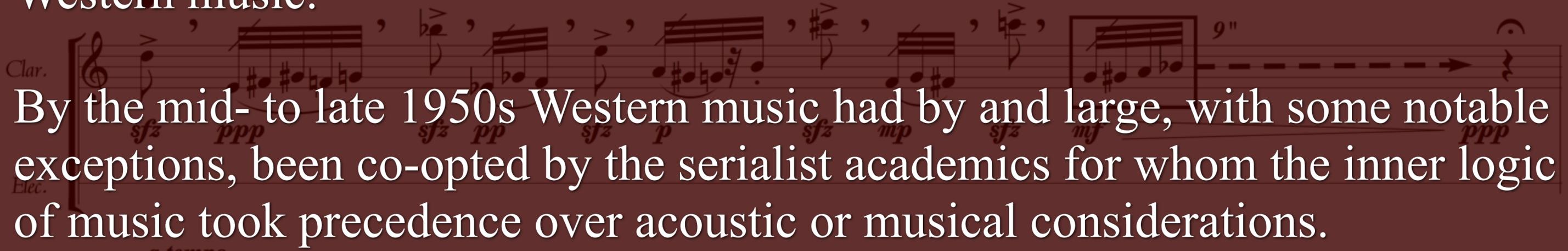
The timing was perfect. By 1958 Britten had recovered (more or less) from the humiliation of *Gloriana* and was looking around for a project that would allow him to express his deeply felt pacifism. After considering, and then rejecting, an oratorio based on the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, he had begun early planning for a traditional Requiem Mass, originally intended for the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Chorus.



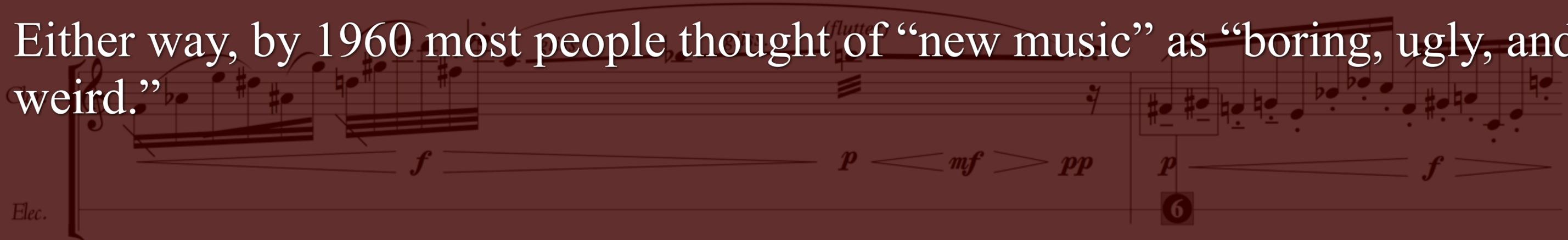
Placed against the frigid reality of the Cold War, with its attendant anxieties about the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis, not to mention the expanding hostilities in Vietnam, a memorial to the dead of two World Wars could not have been a better choice for Britten at this time in his life.



The commission was also arriving at one of the lowest points in the history of Western music.



By the mid- to late 1950s Western music had by and large, with some notable exceptions, been co-opted by the serialist academics for whom the inner logic of music took precedence over acoustic or musical considerations. One reaction against such thinking had been an extremist movement towards silliness and anarchy—such as an ensemble work in which the performers ran around the concert hall, spraying shaving cream at the audience.



Either way, by 1960 most people thought of “new music” as “boring, ugly, and weird.”

Clar. Etec. *mp* *f* *p* *ppp* 7"

This musical system shows the first seven measures. The Clarinet part (top staff) features a melodic line with various dynamics: *mp* (measures 1-2), *f* (measures 3-4), *p* (measure 5), and *ppp* (measures 6-7). The Electric Guitar part (bottom staff) is mostly silent, with a circled number '3' under measure 5. A 'Random Order' instruction is written above measure 7.

Clar. Etec. *sjz* *ppp* *sjz* *pp* *sjz* *p* *sjz* *mp* *sjz* *mf* *ppp* 9"

This system contains measures 8 and 9. The Clarinet part is highly active with *sjz* (sforzando) markings and dynamic changes: *ppp* (measure 8), *pp* (measure 9), *p* (measure 10), *mp* (measure 11), *mf* (measure 12), and *ppp* (measure 13). The Electric Guitar part has a circled number '9' under measure 9.

Clar. Etec. *a tempo* *mp* *f* *p* *pp* *p* 5

This system covers measures 10 through 14. The Clarinet part begins with the tempo marking *a tempo*. Dynamics include *mp* (measure 10), *f* (measure 11), *p* (measure 12), *pp* (measure 13), and *p* (measure 14). The Electric Guitar part has a circled number '5' under measure 14.

Clar. Etec. *f* *p* *mf* *pp* *p* *f* 6

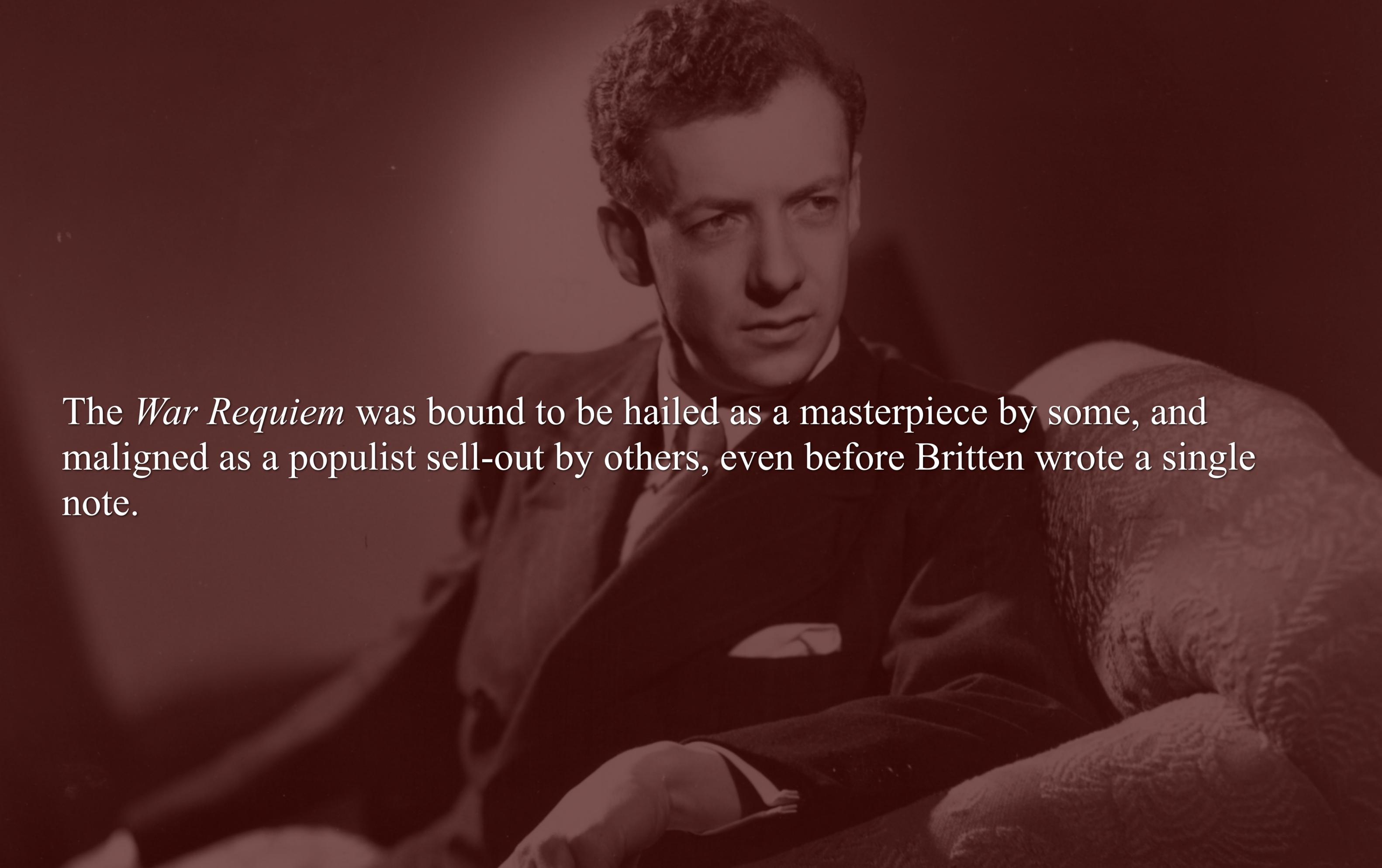
This system contains measures 15 and 16. The Clarinet part features glissando and flutter markings: *f* (measure 15), *p* (measure 16), *mf* (measure 17), and *pp* (measure 18). The Electric Guitar part has a circled number '6' under measure 16.

Britten—one of the lonely few standing against the progressive sterility of contemporary music—had been an outspoken critic of the pretensions of its practitioners and their malign influence over young composers—who were being intimidated out of allowing their own natural gifts to develop.

It is anybody's guess how many promising young talents were stifled by the lockstep cerebralism of the era.



“It is insulting,” Britten stated, “to address an audience in a language that they do not understand.”

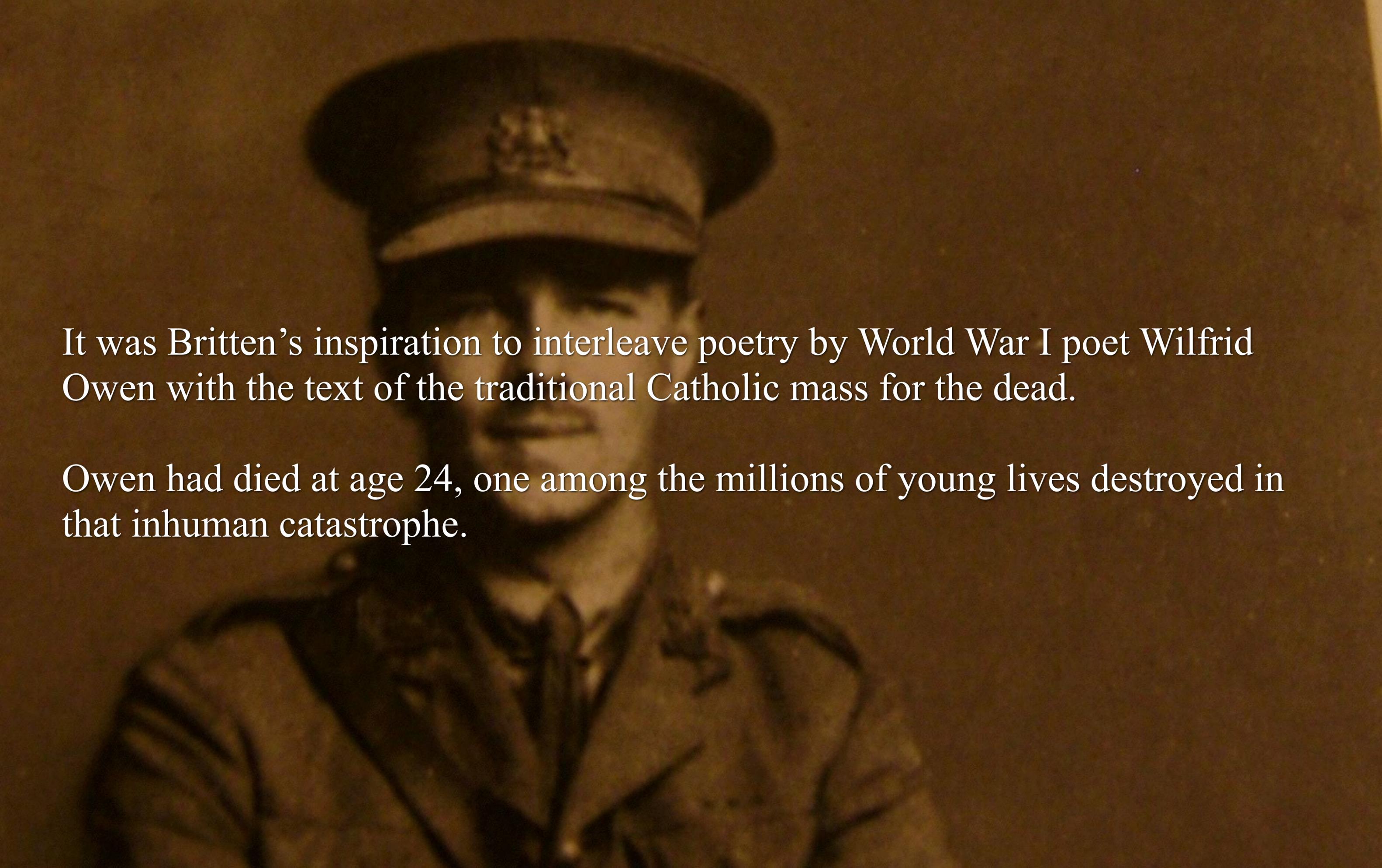


The *War Requiem* was bound to be hailed as a masterpiece by some, and maligned as a populist sell-out by others, even before Britten wrote a single note.

Fortunately, it *was* a masterpiece.

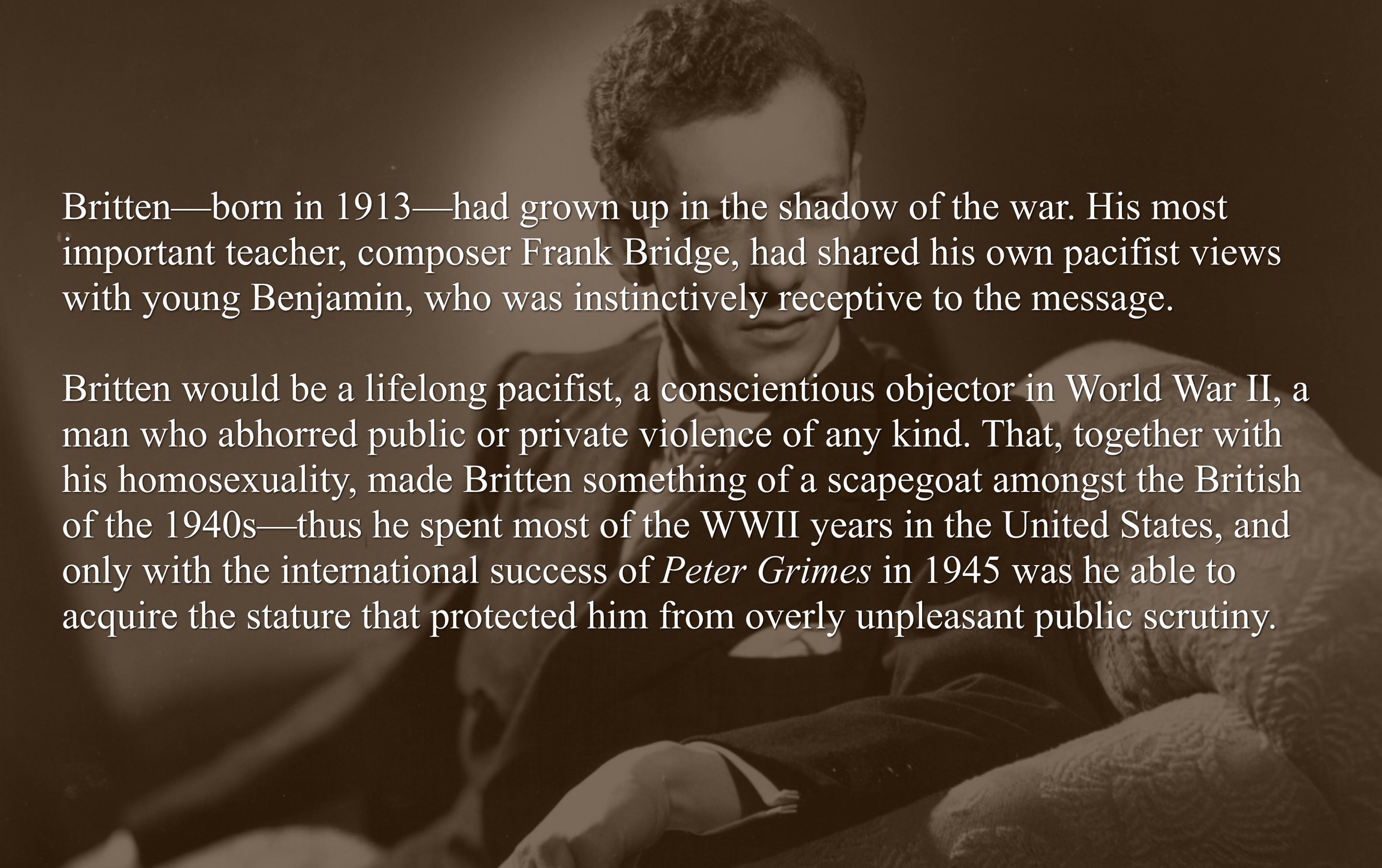
BENJAMIN BRITTEN

WAR REQUIEM



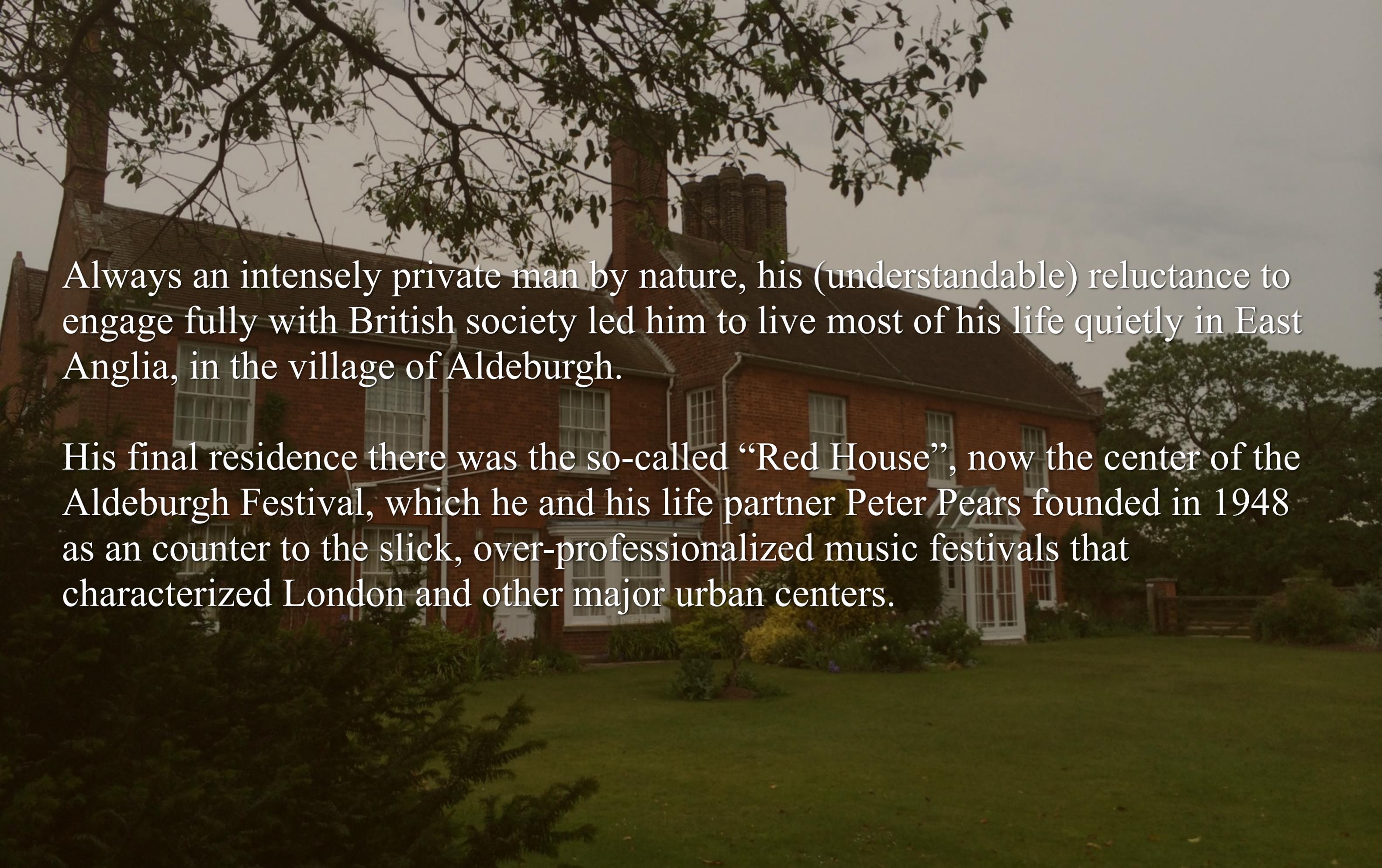
It was Britten's inspiration to interleave poetry by World War I poet Wilfrid Owen with the text of the traditional Catholic mass for the dead.

Owen had died at age 24, one among the millions of young lives destroyed in that inhuman catastrophe.



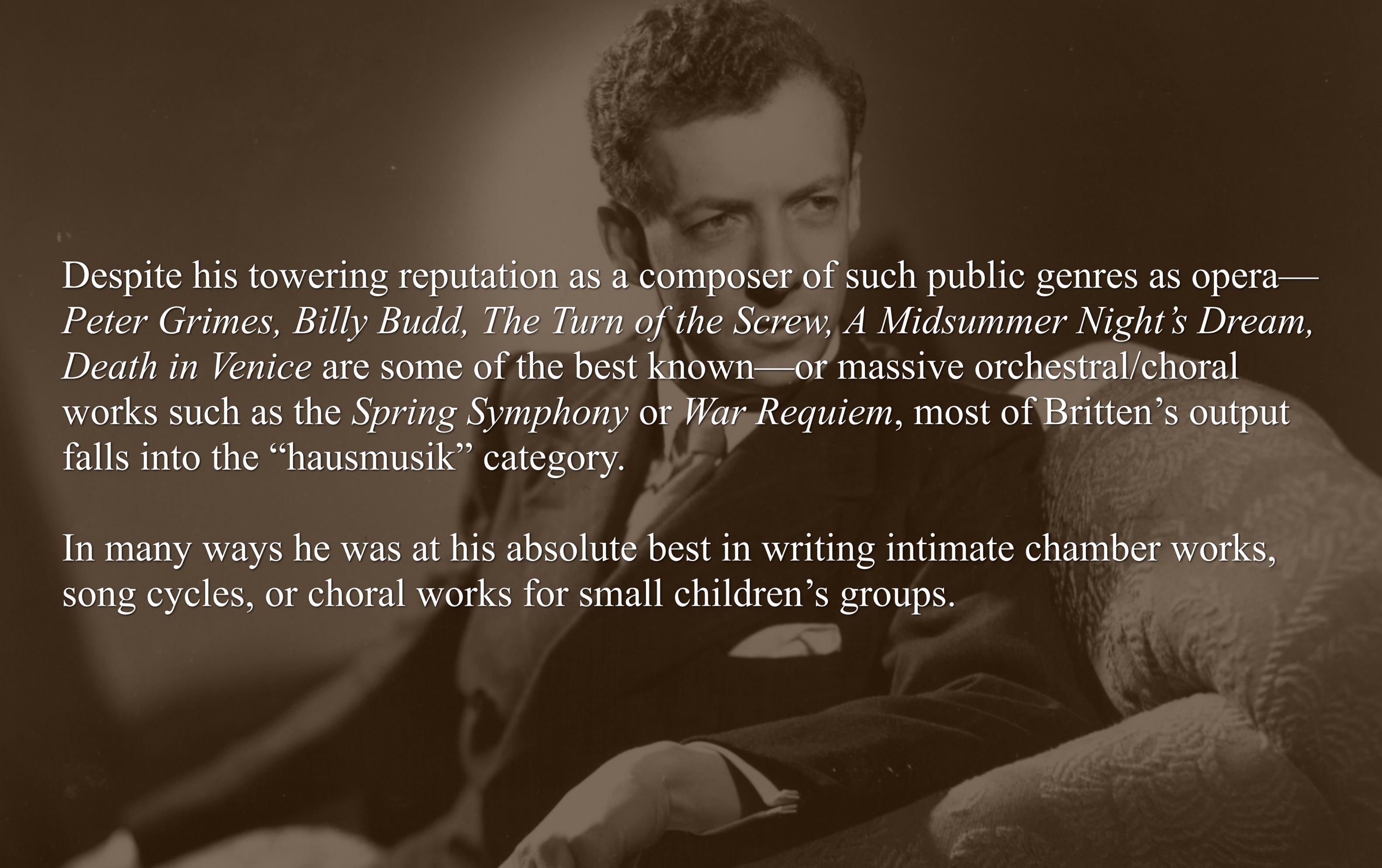
Britten—born in 1913—had grown up in the shadow of the war. His most important teacher, composer Frank Bridge, had shared his own pacifist views with young Benjamin, who was instinctively receptive to the message.

Britten would be a lifelong pacifist, a conscientious objector in World War II, a man who abhorred public or private violence of any kind. That, together with his homosexuality, made Britten something of a scapegoat amongst the British of the 1940s—thus he spent most of the WWII years in the United States, and only with the international success of *Peter Grimes* in 1945 was he able to acquire the stature that protected him from overly unpleasant public scrutiny.



Always an intensely private man by nature, his (understandable) reluctance to engage fully with British society led him to live most of his life quietly in East Anglia, in the village of Aldeburgh.

His final residence there was the so-called “Red House”, now the center of the Aldeburgh Festival, which he and his life partner Peter Pears founded in 1948 as an counter to the slick, over-professionalized music festivals that characterized London and other major urban centers.

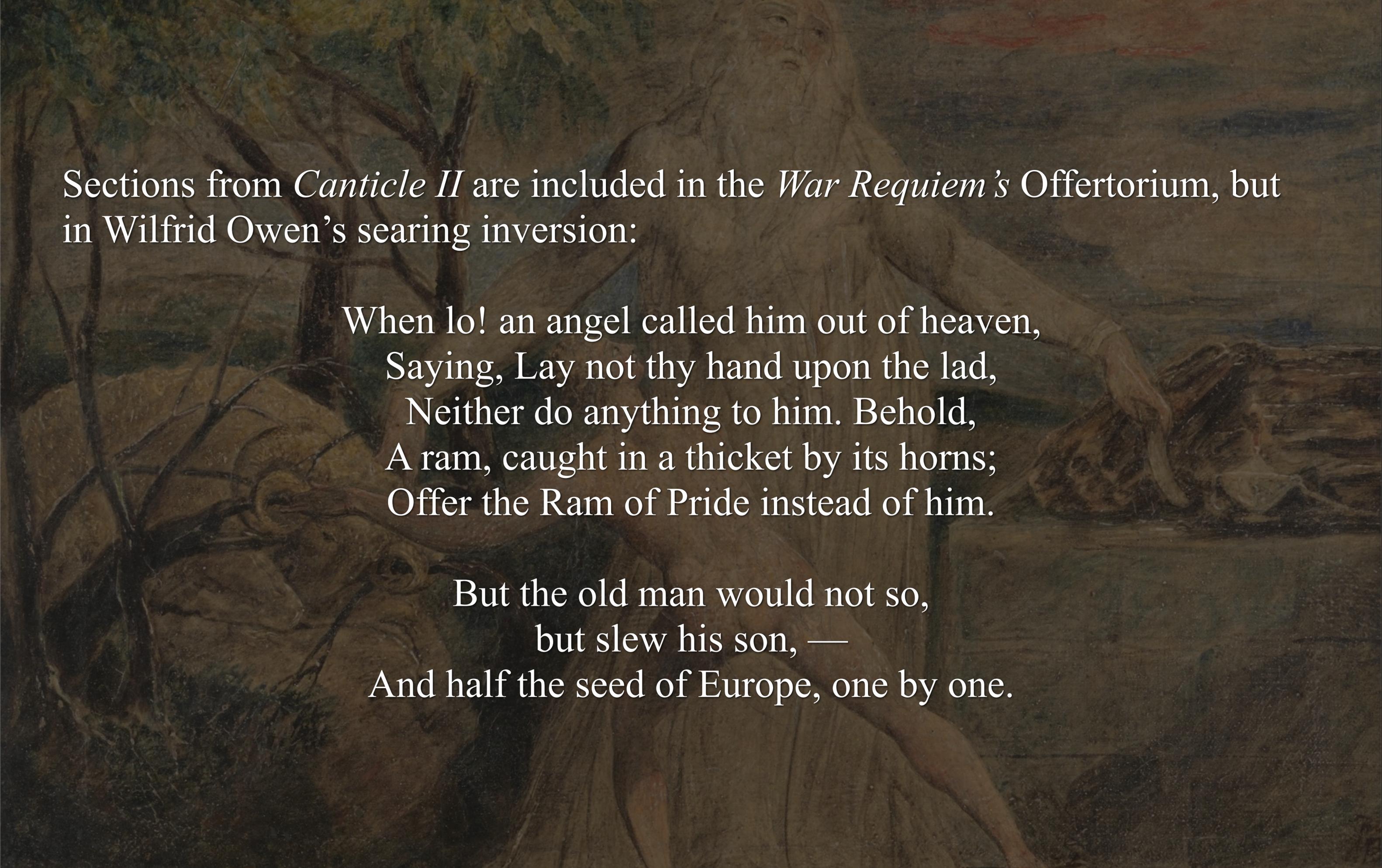


Despite his towering reputation as a composer of such public genres as opera—*Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Death in Venice* are some of the best known—or massive orchestral/choral works such as the *Spring Symphony* or *War Requiem*, most of Britten's output falls into the “hausmusik” category.

In many ways he was at his absolute best in writing intimate chamber works, song cycles, or choral works for small children's groups.

Consider the final sections of the exquisite *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, which tells the Old Testament story with utter economy of means throughout: an older voice for Abraham (Peter Pears), a child's voice for Isaac (John Hahessy), underpinned by a simple but perfectly balanced piano accompaniment (Benjamin Britten).

Abraham is on the verge of killing his son at God's command, but the angel (Pears and Hahessy together, *sotto voce*) appears to tell him that he is to lay down his hand. He and his son sing a hymn of love and thanksgiving together.



Sections from *Canticle II* are included in the *War Requiem's* Offertorium, but in Wilfrid Owen's searing inversion:

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so,
but slew his son, —
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

The *War Requiem* is written for full chorus, a large orchestra, a chamber orchestra, three vocal soloists, and a children's choir that is accompanied by a small organ.

The tenor and baritone soloists sing Wilfrid Owen's poetry with the chamber orchestra. The soprano soloist sings in Latin along with the main chorus. Originally Britten selected soloists representing major combatants in WWII: an Englishman (Peter Pears), a German (Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau), and a Russian (Galina Vishneskaya).

The children's choir is placed at a different location in the hall—typically behind the audience—and sings plainchant-like melodies to Latin texts. More often than not the children's choir sings alone, but at key moments in the work it joins in with the larger ensemble.

Britten's score is tightly organized and economical despite its length (80 minutes) and scope.

Notable tropes throughout the *War Requiem*:

1. March rhythms—many slow and dirge-like, others crisp, others ominous.
2. Chromatic neighbor tones—i.e., the note immediately above the main pitch, such as C-natural to D-flat then back to C-natural.
3. Tritones—the “diabolus in musical” interval, either an augmented fourth or a diminished fifth, harmonically ambiguous and instinctively threatening.
4. Bells, always of a funereal nature and not celebratory.

The opening *Requiem in aeternam* introduces all of those tropes in turn.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

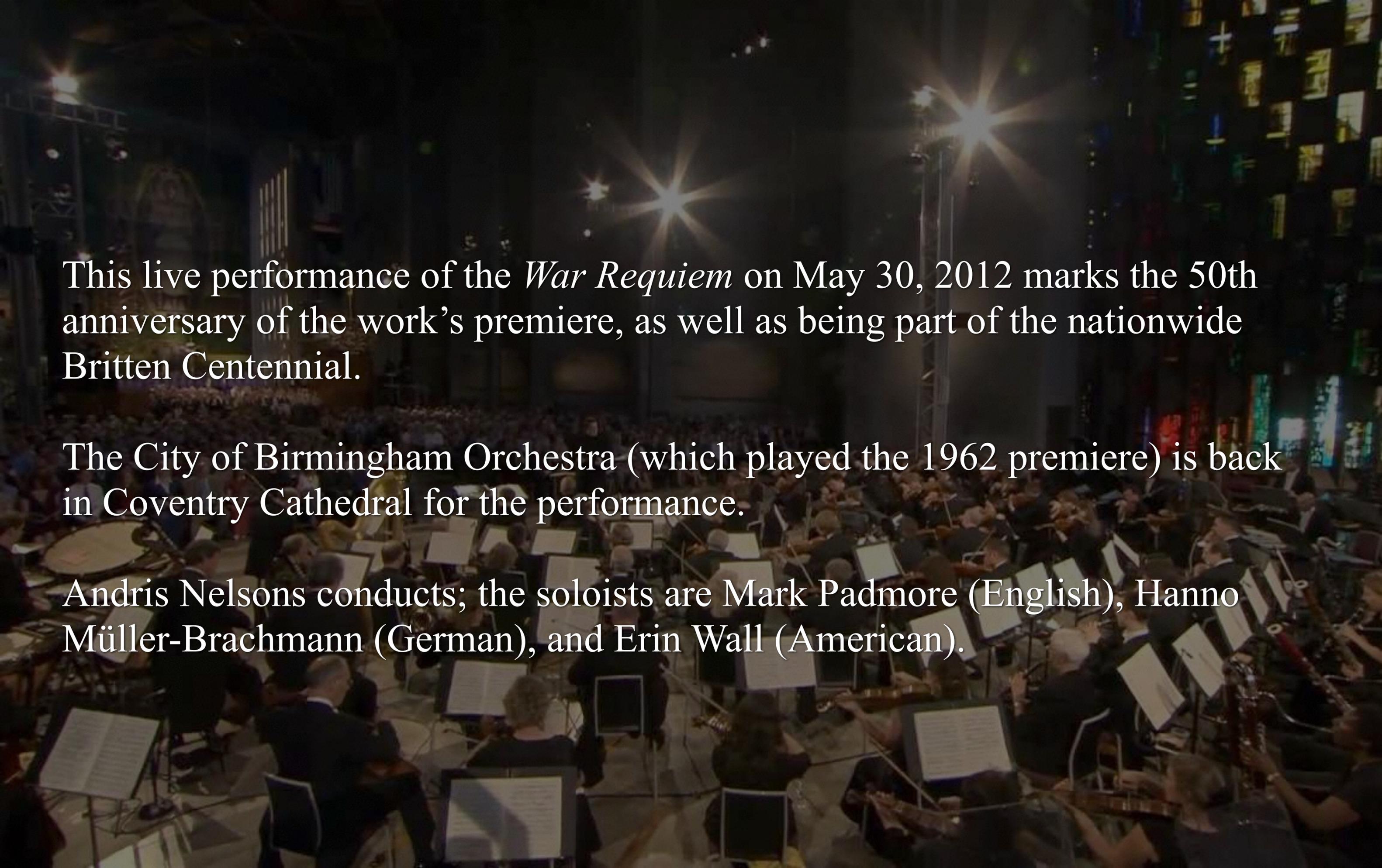
WAR REQUIEM

We hear it in the celebrated original 1963 recording, with Britten conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. The soloist is Peter Pears.



War Requiem: *Libera me*

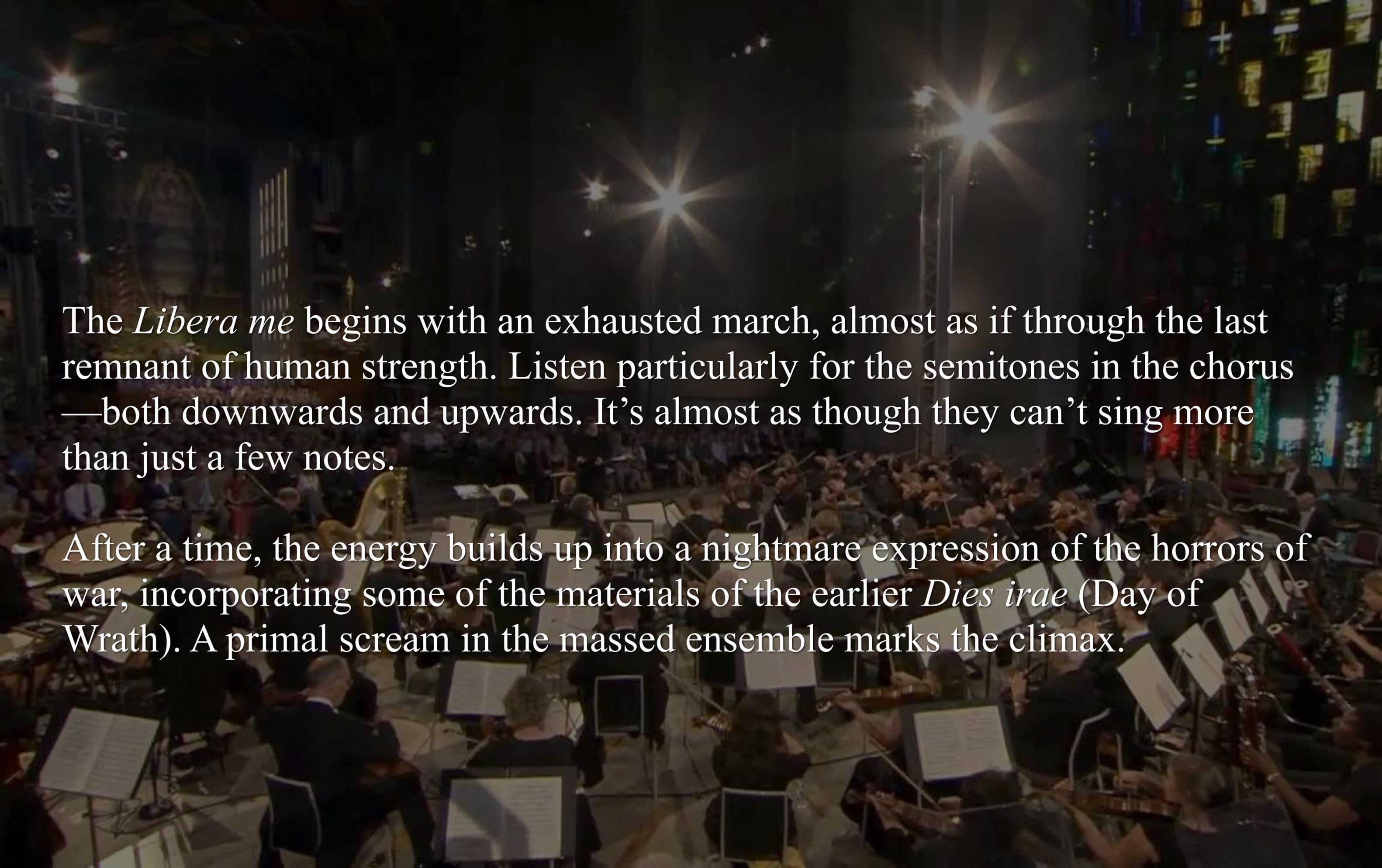
Andris Nelsons / City of Birmingham Orchestra & Chorus / Mark Padmore, tenor / Hanno Müller-Brachman, baritone / Erin Wall, Soprano

A large orchestra is performing in a cathedral. The musicians are seated in rows, facing away from the camera towards the front of the church. They are holding sheet music and various instruments. The cathedral's interior is visible, with high ceilings and large windows. The lighting is dramatic, with bright spotlights illuminating the performers. The overall atmosphere is solemn and grand.

This live performance of the *War Requiem* on May 30, 2012 marks the 50th anniversary of the work's premiere, as well as being part of the nationwide Britten Centennial.

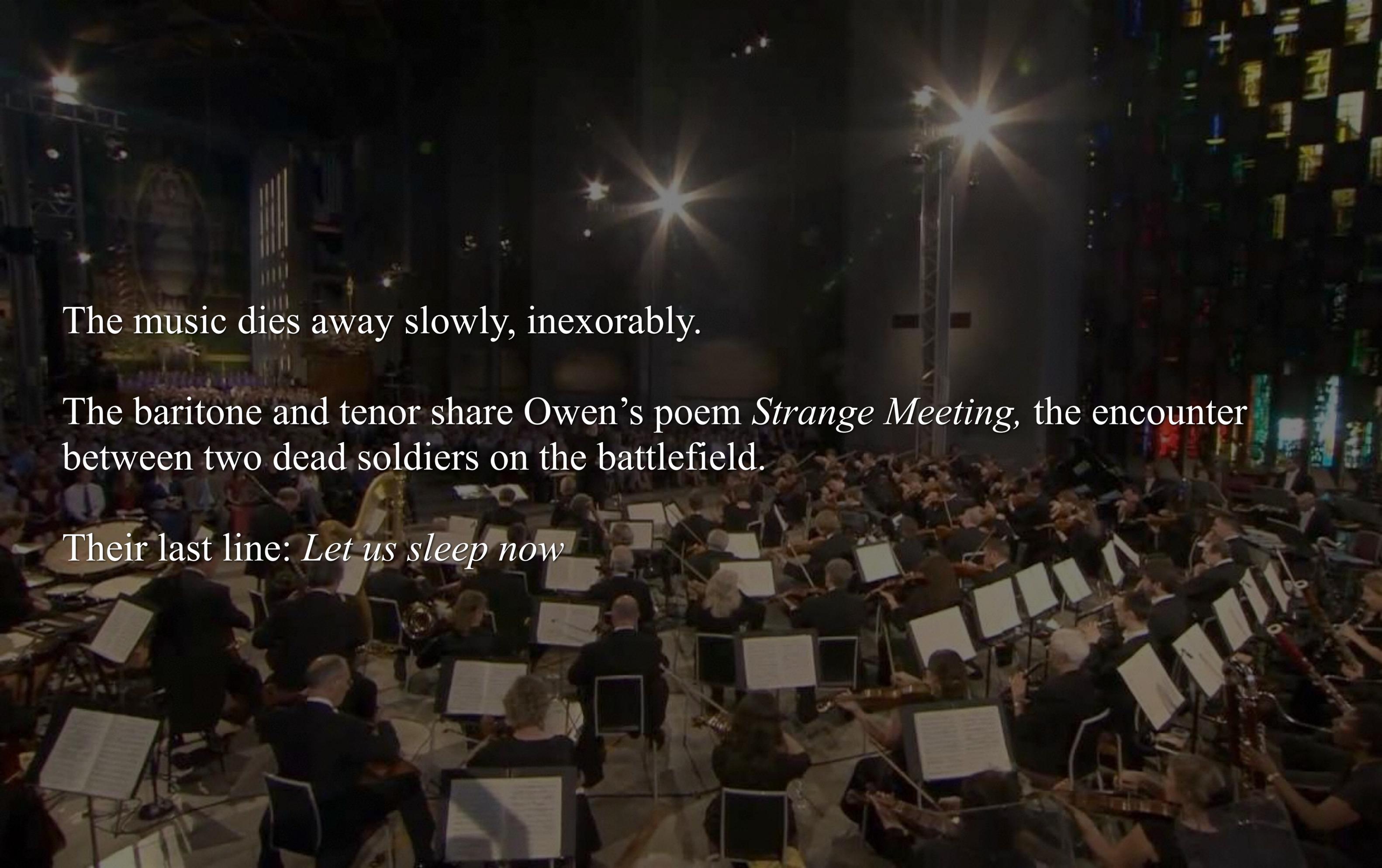
The City of Birmingham Orchestra (which played the 1962 premiere) is back in Coventry Cathedral for the performance.

Andris Nelsons conducts; the soloists are Mark Padmore (English), Hanno Müller-Brachmann (German), and Erin Wall (American).



The *Libera me* begins with an exhausted march, almost as if through the last remnant of human strength. Listen particularly for the semitones in the chorus—both downwards and upwards. It's almost as though they can't sing more than just a few notes.

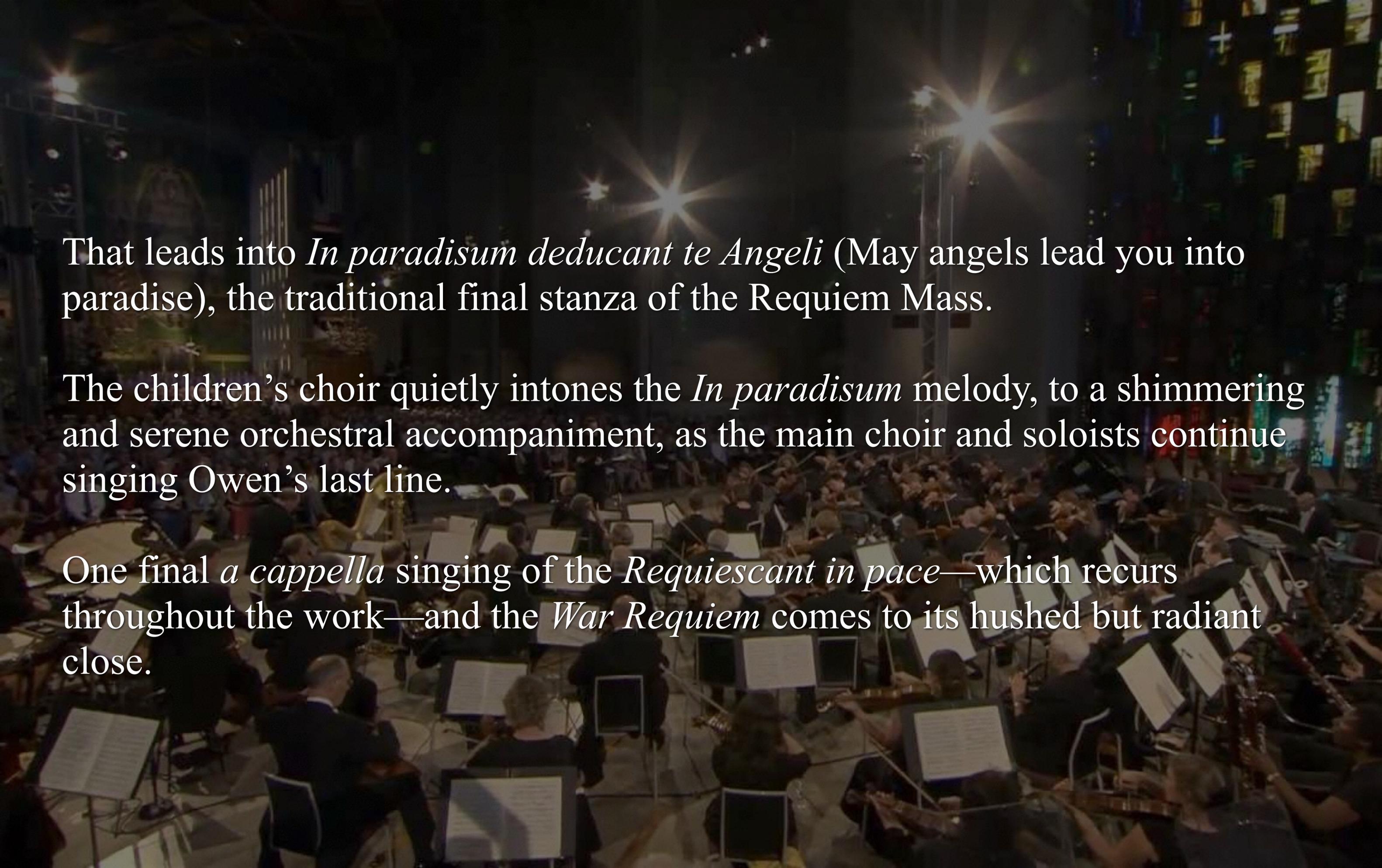
After a time, the energy builds up into a nightmare expression of the horrors of war, incorporating some of the materials of the earlier *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath). A primal scream in the massed ensemble marks the climax.

A large orchestra is performing in a concert hall at night. The musicians are seated in rows, facing away from the camera towards the stage. They are holding various instruments, including violins, violas, cellos, double basses, and woodwinds. The stage is illuminated by bright spotlights, creating a dramatic atmosphere. The background shows the architecture of the concert hall, including a large archway and a balcony with lights.

The music dies away slowly, inexorably.

The baritone and tenor share Owen's poem *Strange Meeting*, the encounter between two dead soldiers on the battlefield.

Their last line: *Let us sleep now*



That leads into *In paradisum deducant te Angeli* (May angels lead you into paradise), the traditional final stanza of the Requiem Mass.

The children's choir quietly intones the *In paradisum* melody, to a shimmering and serene orchestral accompaniment, as the main choir and soloists continue singing Owen's last line.

One final *a cappella* singing of the *Requiescant in pace*—which recurs throughout the work—and the *War Requiem* comes to its hushed but radiant close.

