

Dona Nobis Pacem

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) wrote many works for chorus and orchestra, all spread throughout his very long career. The "anthology" choral form suited him: he enjoyed selecting and setting great texts, and the genre contains some of his finest work.

Dona nobis pacem comes from the early Thirties. The composer meant it as a warning against war. This led some early commentators to call the work "prophetic" of World War II, but the war Vaughan Williams probably had in mind was the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The texts come from the mass, Whitman, the Bible, and John Bright – another anthology work. For years, I thought of it as the precursor to Britten's War Requiem but only because I knew of no other similar British "anthology" work on the same subject. However, I found out that Arthur Bliss beat out Vaughan Williams with *Morning Heroes* of 1928. So Vaughan Williams gets no prize for being first. Still, the work still hits with power, and, again, I feel it as Vaughan Williams's paying his debt to the Verdi Requiem. Consider this excerpt from Vaughan Williams's essay "A Musical Autobiography":

By that time I had quite recovered from my Gounod fever and had become the complete prig. Bach, Beethoven (ex-officio), Brahms, and Wagner were the only composers worth considering.... I heard Verdi's Requiem for the first time. At first I was properly shocked by the frank sentimentalism and sensationalism of the music. I remember being particularly horrified at the drop of a semitone on the word "Dona." Was not this the purest "village organist"? But in a very few minutes the music possessed me. I realized that here was a composer who could do all the things which I with my youthful pedantry thought wrong, indeed, would be unbearable in a lesser man; music which was sentimental, theatrical, occasionally even cheap, and yet was an overpowering masterpiece. That day I learnt that there is nothing in itself that is "common or unclean," indeed that there are no canons of art except that contained in the well-worn tag, "To thine own self be true."

Aside from the beautiful sense of the passage, note the "drop of a semitone" on "Dona" – Vaughan Williams does exactly the same on the identical word. A setting of Whitman's "Beat, beat, drums!" recalls, particularly in its use of the bass drum and its key shifts by thirds, Verdi's "Dies irae." The two works also resemble one another in their genesis: decades separated the first notes from the last. Verdi, of course, started with the "Libera me" as his contribution to a collaborative requiem for Rossini. The death of Manzoni inspired the composer to incorporate this section into a complete, original setting of the requiem. Vaughan Williams wrote the "Dirge for Two Veterans" in 1914, possibly as part of a friendly competition with Holst. Holst's setting, characteristically spare, for male chorus and brass, concentrates its power. Vaughan Williams produced a symphonic march, not unlike the finale of his "London" symphony, which has grand, dramatic sweep. That both the Verdi and the Vaughan Williams sections fit into their newer forms with no stylistic jar strikes me as little short of amazing.

In fact, even though *Dona nobis pacem* runs through a gamut of styles – from the neo-Brahmsian song of *Toward the Unknown Region*, to the energy of Old King Cole of the Twenties, to the power of the recent Fourth Symphony – it never feels like a rummage sale, perhaps because the

word-setting strikes one as so right, no mean feat with the irregular cadences of Whitman. The oratorio falls into the following sections:

Agnus Dei

Beat, beat, drums! (Whitman)

Reconciliation (Whitman)

Dirge for Two Veterans (Whitman)

The Angel of Death (John Bright, the Book of Jeremiah)

O man greatly beloved (the Books of Haggai, Daniel, Micah, Leviticus, Psalms, Isaiah, and Luke)

"Agnus Dei" begins with the urgent cry of the solo soprano for peace. The section builds tension that bursts out with "Beat, beat, drums!" After volleys of percussion wild fanfares from the brass, reminiscent of Verdi's "Tuba mirum," the movement fades into "Reconciliation," "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" – a tender lullaby for all the dead. As the poet moves from the universal to the specific, Vaughan Williams changes his music to reflect the emptiness of grief. This leads to the powerful "Dirge." Then "The Angel of Death" gives way to a lament for the death of peace itself. This, too, passes, and we hear a strong call for peace. The final section, a forerunner of the passacaglia of Symphony #5, begins in Vaughan Williams' "pastoral" manner, here stiffened with a strong contrapuntal spine, breaks into a blaze of glory, and fades to the solo soprano's prayer for peace, this time another benediction. The oratorio's optimism turned out historically unjustified in the short run, but works of art that still speak to us have transcended history. The oratorio's hope doesn't come cheap, and, with Britten's *War Requiem*, it remains one of the most satisfying musical "answers" to the questions raised by war itself.

Excerpted from: www.classical.net/Copyright © [Steve Schwartz](#), 2000.

Messa di Gloria

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was born in Lucca, Italy into a family with a long history of music. After the death of his father when he was only five years old, he was sent to study with his uncle Fortunato Magi, who considered him to be a poor and undisciplined student. Later, he took the position of church organist and choir master, but it was not until he saw a performance of Verdi's *Aida* that he became inspired to be an opera composer. He and a friend walked an entire 13 miles to see the performance in Pisa.

In 1880, the *Messa di Gloria* (Gloria Mass -- note: the "gloria" mass, more common with Italian liturgical composers than others, only sets the opening two prayers of the Catholic Mass, the Kyrie and the Gloria. Previous examples are Rossini's of 1823, and the extensive "Gloria" settings by Vivaldi), composed at the age of 21, marked the end of Puccini's apprenticeship as a composer and the culmination of his family's long association with church music in his native Lucca. The work offers fascinating glimpses of the dramatic power that Puccini was soon to unleash on Milan's stages. The orchestration and the overall feeling of drama conveyed by his music establish a dialogue with Verdi's *Requiem* and perhaps already constitute a prediction of the future operatic career Puccini would embrace for life.

From 1880 to 1883 he studied at the Milan Conservatory under Amilcare Ponchielli and Antonio Bazzini. In 1882, Puccini entered a competition for a one-act opera. Although he did not win, *Le Villi* was later staged in 1884 at the Teatro dal Verme; it also caught the attention of Giulio Ricordi, head of G. Ricordi & Co. music publishers, who commissioned a second opera, *Edgar* (1889).

From 1891 on, Puccini passed more and more of his time at Torre del Lago, in the Tuscan countryside. In this place on the border of the Massaciuccoli lake, where he passed lots of time hunting, he found refuge from the crowded city. Later he built a villa and moved there definitively in 1900. It was to remain his home and workplace until the very last years of his life. He is buried in the villa's chapel.

Excerpted from www.robertoiarussi.com