

Rohan Joshi

Prof. Schmidt

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Britten, Adams, and Memorial Space

The concept of providing a space to a listener of a musical memorial is something relatively intangible, and difficult to describe. Nevertheless, two significant musical memorials utilize this concept in order to elicit powerful reactions from their audience. The first, Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," is a work of considerable fame regarding the horrors of the world wars. Britten, being a pacifist, wrote the work for a rebuilt cathedral that had been bombed. The second work, by post-minimalist composer John Adams' "On the Transmigration of Souls," is a widely acclaimed work regarding the aftermath of 9/11. Both works deal with considerable tragedies, and create memory space in different ways. By looking closer at the construction of this space in both works, and specifically how both composers musically approach their works, the emotional power of both works and their connection to the events they are memorializing can be understood.

John Adams when asked about whether his work was a memorial or a requiem responds:

"I want to avoid words like "requiem" or "memorial" when describing this piece because they too easily suggest conventions that this piece doesn't share. If pressed, I'd probably call the piece a 'memory space'. It's a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions." (Adams)

Adams clearly does not want to pigeonhole the work in the category that prior works have been. This could not be more obvious when comparing the work the “War Requiem,” where Britten has structured the work in a relatively anachronistic style. The Requiem is a genre of music that goes back to the times of Gregorian chant, and this feature is one of the few conventions that Adams is clearly harkening to when describing the construction of the work. Adams is not implying that Britten’s “War Requiem” is not a valid musical space, but is making clear that the path to his work is markedly different from other works in the genre, due to the inherent difference in impact of 9/11.

Adams approach to the piece is from an external perspective, in that he “had no desire to create a musical ‘narrative’ or description,” (Adams) and was instead more worried about the “millions and millions of pieces of paper floating out of the windows” (Adams) of the towers after the attacks. This poignant observation foreshadows the first significant disjunction amongst both works- Adams does not intend to include his personal views of the attacks in his works, and is writing a work primarily focused on victim and listener experience. Britten, on the other hand, considered the work to be “perhaps the most important work [he has] yet written.” (Britten). The “War Requiem” is a statement against war, “about man’s inhumanity to man” (warrequiem.org). These choices further reflect in the use of Wilfred Owen’s poetry in the work- these poems are stark, brutal in nature, and are mostly meant to accurately show the horror of the war. When Adam’s recites names in his work, he is not trying to paint pictures of dead bodies, rather, he is trying to prod at the memories of his listeners and make them remember loss. Both of these approaches are different, and effective in their own right.

Britten wrote the requiem for the literal space of Coventry Cathedral, completely destroyed during WWII and rebuilt afterward. As such, the requiem serves as a memorial for

itself: the cathedral is a unique victim of the war that was brought back to life after the war had ended. Essentially, it is impossible to view Britten's musical innovations without keeping the musical relation to the church itself. This centrality of the physical space in the composition is simultaneously memorialized through the massive orchestral backing that Britten asks for. The multiple choruses and two orchestras of separate sizes were no doubt chosen to fill sound. Of course, the large orchestras will also contribute to creating a massive sound, representative of the noise of war. One aspect of the orchestration of the requiem shared by Adams' work is usage of a children's chorus:

“It's common to give the children's choir a certain “ethereal” or “angelic” role in a big concert piece[...]and Benjamin Britten takes advantage of their innate “innocence” in his “War Requiem”. I wanted the children's choir not just for these qualities but also because theirs is [...] a very different sound from the mature voices of an adult chorus. [...]It [is] such a powerful effect to play the children's sound off that of the adults that I determined to take it much further in “Souls”. (Adams)

His remarks on Britten's Requiem are accurate- the variation in choral orchestration allows access to different points of the war, again a comment on the space that Britten's work is trying to create. Adam's was not trying to depict different aspects of 9/11, as much as he wanted to evoke different personal reactions and memories of the event from the work. Britten did this as well, but this was not his primary intent.

An important aspect of Adam's composition is how it starts *en media res*. The sounds of the city which start the piece make it feel like a part of the city- immediately making the piece sound homogenous with reality and the space more personal to those who are from the city and were affected by the 9/11 attacks. This synthesis is something not present in Britten's requiem,

as the requiem form that he follows needs a first introductory movement. Although this movement is quiet, relative to the intensity of some of the following movements, there is a distinct start to the sound space created. Adams comments on this:

“I realized immediately that 9/11 was already so well documented, so over described and the images so overexposed that I didn’t really need to worry about an “exposition” of my material. Every listener hearing this piece will already know the story. In a way, that kind of “numbing familiarity” gave me a certain freedom to work with the materials.”

(Adams)

This pervasive quality of 9/11, and how it so fundamentally changed the state of the United States, made Adams’ approach to introducing the piece much simpler. The ‘souls’ referenced in the titles are not referring to souls in general, but the souls of those who lost their lives in the tragedy of the attacks. When Britten wrote his war memorial, decades after the end of both wars, the distance of the war made it difficult for him to immediately dive into the more emotionally intense material, and necessitated an introduction (even though it is inherent in the musical form). As such, Britten had to tackle making his music more universal, which was partially a reflection of his pacifist belief. This is another major disjunction in both works- Adams’ work, being closer in proximity to 9/11, made it easier for him to refine the emotional space of the work. Britten, writing after the fact, had to make some of his material apply to either war, even though some of the materials used referenced the first war (Owen’s poetry).

Adams’ piece, however, is a much more emotionally straightforward memorial space. The work starts out quiet, and slowly crescendos to its (loud) emotional climax, and quiets down through the coda. Britten’s work is less emotionally clear, and can be slightly ambiguous in the emotions it wants to draw. In many movements, the violence of the text chosen is juxtaposed

with the beauty of a sole singer, or aforementioned children's chorus. This juxtaposition, again, reflects on Britten's more universal approach to the space that he is creating. Juxtaposition is also in the harmony of the work: Britten coats the work in the dissonance of the tritone between a C and F#. Many phrases cadence into the tritone, rather than moving away from it. In Adams' work, such an important harmonic implication does not exist- what does is the names being spoken throughout. The fundamental difference in the spaces, that both composers are describing events experienced so differently, is shown between these two choices. Adams further discusses his textual choice:

“So I eventually settled on a surprisingly small amount of text [that] falls into three categories. I found friends and family members with different vocal timbres and asked each to read from the long list of victims. Then I made a sort of mantra-like composition out of the tape-recorded reading of these names, starting with the voice of a nine year-old boy and ending with that of two middle aged women, both mothers themselves. I mixed this with taped sounds of the city—traffic, people walking, distant voices of laughter or shouting, trucks, cars, sirens, steel doors shutting, brakes squealing—all the familiar sounds of the big city which are so common that we usually never notice them.” (Adams)

Each of Adams' choices is backed by the fact that he wanted to make the memory space specific and pointed towards the personal aspect of 9/11. He calling the repetition of the names a “mantra” makes it clear that the name reading is meant to serve a similar purpose to the structural importance of the tritone in Britten's work. In addition, it is important to recognize how many of Adams' choices regard timbre, and represent the diversity of background of those affected by 9/11 through this varied timbre. Britten does something similar, but has multiple movements lasting over an hour to approach the magnitude of the events he is trying to describe.

The duration of both pieces is significantly different, and rightly so, as both works are attempting to create memory spaces of literal and figurative different sizes.

Memory spaces created by memorial musical works, such as “On the Transmigration of Souls” and the “War Requiem” are incredibly powerful. Although the composers took two different approaches to each work, certain commonalities between the composition reinforce the power of both works: the usage of motives, text, timbral variation, and orchestral variation. This set of musical tools has been completely changed by both Britten and Adams to fit the spaces that the both wanted to create for their works- Britten, taking the task of creating a work of pacifism dedicated to both world wars, needed to compose a space that was more universal and more structurally rigorous. Adams, understanding that the proximity of 9/11 to the writing of his work would aid to its potency, utilized a more compact form that relies on the nuance of individual memory. Both memorials are powerful in their own right, and produce very powerful memorial spaces, but most importantly, both works typify the power of musical memorials.

Works Cited

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