

## The War Requiem in Salisbury Cathedral

A magnificent presentation of Britten's War Requiem in Salisbury Cathedral on the eve of the centenary of the Armistice must be one of the Salisbury Musical Society's greatest achievements. Under the admirable direction of David Halls this choral masterpiece used the combined forces of the SMS Choir, the Chelsea Opera Group Orchestra, three distinguished soloists and the Cathedral Choristers (a total of over 250 performers). The emotional effect of the work is astounding and complex. Britten expresses his hatred of war and profound sorrow for its effects in a remarkable juxtaposition of the Latin words of the Requiem Mass, and the savage words of the poet Wilfred Owen, who died from machine-gun fire aged 25, whilst trying to cross the Sambre-Oise Canal on November 4<sup>th</sup> 1918, a week before the Armistice. It was helpful to have the full text available in the excellent programmes last Saturday, so that the sharp contrasts and paradoxes within each of the six sections of the Mass could be followed.

Britten's genius is at its peak in every moment of the War Requiem, and this performance did full justice to it. The three soloists stood well forward so that their superb voices and diction carried perfectly. Particularly memorable were the passages where a conversation occurs between soloist and choir, such as when Elizabeth Llewellyn (soprano) soared effortlessly above the choir in the Dies Irae and Libera Mei. Mark Wilde (tenor) and Julian Van Mellaerts (baritone) sang the Owen poetry with great clarity and expression. Some is almost unbearable, for example the exact quotation from Britten's Cantata Abraham and Isaac, which in the War Requiem is suddenly turned to savagery as Abraham "slew his son, and half the seed of Europe, one by one". The words "one by one" then keep reappearing whilst the ethereal voices of the young choristers sing a prayer for remembered souls.

David Halls decided in this performance to place the Cathedral Choristers a long distance away behind the audience. This worked wonderfully. They sounded as if in another world, singing the beautiful words of the Mass in tranquility whilst the appalling inhumanities of war happened elsewhere. How the choristers and the rest of the musicians stayed in perfect musical coordination is nothing short of a miracle, but they did!

The Chelsea Opera Group Orchestra was augmented to 85 players, with very strong brass and percussion sections. The harrowing sounds of warfare (cannons firing, shells screaming through the air, wild bugle calls) were overwhelming. Within the main orchestra was a chamber orchestra of 11 players, which accompanied the soloists with beautiful effect and a prominent role for the harp. The SMS Choir sang with precision and excellent intonation in music which must have taken many hours to learn. Their singing of the exquisite soft moments of the Kyrie, the Agnus Dei, and the final Amen was nothing short of magical. In fact after the last chord died away the whole audience was spell-bound and totally silent for a good 20 seconds before tumultuous applause broke out for this wonderful performance.

Richard Godfrey