

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

Dona nobis pacem

For British composers at the turn of the century, the poetry of Walt Whitman had a profound fascination. The finest works from this source were those by Delius, Vaughan Williams and Holst, notably *Sea-Drift*, *A Sea Symphony* and *Ode to Death*. Vaughan Williams had first set words by Whitman in 1904. In 1911, following the successful launching of *A Sea Symphony*, he began another Whitman setting, *Dirge for Two Veterans*, from the American Civil War poem *Drum Taps*. Perhaps because he felt it did not stand satisfyingly on its own, he put it away in a drawer, and it emerged 25 years later as the fourth movement of his large-scale cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*. This was composed for the centenary of the Huddersfield Choral Society in 1936, but it was also a piece of propaganda, a commentary on the state of Europe as it moved inexorably towards another major war. In an article in 1912 Vaughan Williams wrote: "We must cultivate a sense of musical citizenship... The composer must... live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community". Now he was practising what he had preached, expressing the community's prayer for peace in the light of the events in Germany in the 1930s. The first performance was given in Huddersfield on 2 October 1936, with Renée Flynn and Roy Henderson as soloists, the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Albert Coates.

The words are selected from various sources, principally from the scriptures and Whitman. The interpolation of the one into the other pre-echoes Britten's scheme in his *War Requiem* of 25 years later. Skilfully though the libretto is compiled, *Dona Nobis Pacem* cannot be said to be a unified musical conception. However, the sheer quality of the music has ensured that it has outlived the occasion for which it was written and, alas, the subject grows no less topical. The cantata is in five main sections:

1. *Agnus Dei (Lento)*. After two bars of orchestral chromatic chords, the soprano enters *pianissimo* with the Latin prayer from the Liturgy, her 'Dona nobis pacem', the work's principal *leitmotif*, thrice repeated. The chorus echoes this plea for peace and then, in a sudden discordant outburst, the soloist and chorus cry it to the heavens. As this climax subsides, the drums begin beating and the music flows without a break into
2. *Beat! Beat! Beat! (Allegro moderato)*. Trumpet calls over beating drums are a prelude to the chorus's words from Whitman's *Drum Taps*, a declamatory description of the overwhelming effects of war on town and countryside. Short harsh ejaculatory phrases convey the ruthlessness of war. This leads into
3. *Reconciliation (Andantino)*. The stridency of the previous section is banished by strings high in their register and the musings of a solo violin, in a serene slow movement typical of Vaughan Williams. The words are again from *Drum Taps* and are sung by the baritone soloist with his message of ultimate reconciliation sung to music of notable compassion. This section is repeated by the chorus, after which the soloist continues with the passage 'For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead'. This again foreshadows Britten's use of Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting* in the *War Requiem*. The chorus repeat the first section and the soprano quietly interjects her prayerful 'Dona nobis pacem' to close the movement.

4. *Dirge for Two Veterans (Moderato alla marcia)*. Over a steady drum rhythm a solemn march-tune introduces the Whitman word-picture of the burial by moonlight of a father and son who have been killed in battle. The chorus sing this movement, setting the scene with a description of the rising of the moon and the arrival of the cortège at the double grave. The march is thundered out in C major, the chorus silent. The vocal writing now becomes modal before the intense climax and quiet ending. This movement's melodic directness is apposite to the directness of the message of this work, so it justifies its central position and, without knowing it, one would not guess the music's earlier date.

5. *Finale*. To a sparse accompaniment, the baritone declaims John Bright's words about the Angel of Death, spoken in the House of Commons in 1855 in a debate on the Crimean War. The soprano soloist and chorus renew their anguished cry for peace, the chorus following this with man's perennial despairing question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?". Vaughan Williams suggests that there is, for the baritone sings an assurance of peace. Now the orchestra begins to glow radiantly with a beautiful passacaglia-like melody, as the chorus sing of nations at peace with one another. As this vision intensifies, the vocal and orchestral writing become contrapuntal in texture and the bells begin to peal. To the passacaglia-tune a new heaven and a new earth are invoked and finally the Christmas message of peace and goodwill toward men. The last three words are reiterated emphatically, followed by a coda in which the chorus reaffirm the soprano's final entreaty, 'Dona nobis pacem', which brings the cantata to a quiet and peaceful ending in a final impression of optimism.

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Cantata, *Dona nobis pacem*

I

*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi
Dona nobis pacem*

II

Beat! beat! drums! - blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows - through doors - burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet - no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums - so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums! - blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities - over the rumble of wheels in the streets;
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep
in those beds,
No bargainers' bargains by day - would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums - you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums! - blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley - stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid - mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums - so loud you bugles blow.

Walt Whitman

III

Reconciliation

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 soil'd 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.

Walt Whitman

IV

Dirge for Two Veterans

The last sunbeam
Lightly falls from the finish'd Sabbath,
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking,
Down a new-made double grave.

Lo, the moon ascending,
Up from the east the silvery round moon,
Beautiful over the house-tops, ghastly, phantom moon,
Immense and silent moon.

I see a sad procession,
And I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles,
All the channels of the city streets they're flooding,
As with voices and with tears.

I hear the great drums pounding,
And the small drums steady whirring,
And every blow of the great convulsive drums,
Strikes me through and through.

For the son is brought with the father,
In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,
Two veterans son and father dropt together,
And the double grave awaits them.

Now nearer blow the bugles,
And the drums strike more convulsive,
And the daylight o'er the pavement quite has faded,
And the strong dead-march enwraps me.

In the eastern sky up-buoying,
The sorrowful vast phantom moves illumined,
'Tis some mother's large transparent face,
In heaven brighter growing.

O strong dead-march you please me!
O moon immense with your silvery face you soothe me!
O my soldiers twain! O my veterans passing to burial!
What I have I also give you.

The moon gives you light,
And the bugles and the drums give you music,
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,
My heart gives you love.

Walt Whitman

V

The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings. There is no one as of old . . . to sprinkle with blood the lintel and the two side-posts of our doors,
that he may spare and pass on.

John Bright

Dona nobis pacem

We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble!
The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan; the whole land trembled at the sound of the neighing of his strong ones; for they are come, and have devoured the land . . .
and those that dwell therein. . . .

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved . . .
Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

Jeremiah viii 15-22

O man, greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong.

Daniel x, 19

The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former . . . and in this place will I give peace

Haggai ii, 9

VI

Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.
And none shall make them afraid, neither shall the sword go through their land.
Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
Open to me the gates of righteousness, I will go into them.
Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled; and let them hear, and say,
it is the truth.
And it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues.
And they shall come and see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and they shall
declare my glory among the nations.
For as the new heavens, and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me,
so shall your seed and your name remain for ever.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.

(Adapted from Micah iv, 3, Leviticus xxvi, 6, Psalms lxxxv, 10 and cxviii, 19,
Isaiah xliii, 9, and lxvi, 18-22, and Luke ii, 14.)