

5 : IN TIME OF WAR

A. WE SHALL REMEMBER THEM

1. Class title 1 (*Attila* at La Scala)
2. Section title A (Rugby Memorial Chapel)

I was born near the beginning of the Second World War, but was raised in the shadow of the First. Those pictures were of the **Memorial Chapel at my school, Rugby**. One of the names on the memorial is of **Colin Maclehose**, my father's best friend at school; others are Rugby families whose descendants were classmates of mine. My father served as a young lieutenant at 18, and was wounded, perhaps more in the mind than the body. He seldom talked about it, but I lived in its shadow. Britain is full of war memorials in stone, but I want to start with a memorial in sound, the opening of the *Dies Irae* movement of the *War Requiem*, composed in 1961 by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76) for the rededication of Coventry Cathedral in the Second World War, but containing settings of poems written by **Wilfred Owen** (1893–1918), who was killed in the final days of the First. This is not opera, I know, but it was made into a fine film in 1988 by **Derek Jarman** (1942–94); I want to discuss how the various elements—music, newsreel videos, and staged sequences—work (or do not work) together.

3. Britten/Jarman: *War Requiem*, opening of *Dies Irae*
4. Britten/Jarman: *War Requiem*, title

What elements were in that clip? Well, first the actual battlefield shots, but there is not much you can do with those in opera. On the other hand, WW1 has become a reference point for senseless carnage. The War has developed its own iconography, in the uniforms, the crosses, the poppies, the mustaches on the men. it doesn't take more than a mere hint to give **context** to a production that may actually be about something quite different. The next section of the class will give two examples of this from opera productions, one using WW1 imagery, the other WW2.

5. Britten/Jarman: *War Requiem*, title transformation

But there is another element at play here; for want of a better word, I will call it **transcendence**. It is impossible to deal with War as a subject in itself without processing it in some way: using it as a metaphor, perhaps; treating it as epic or myth; looking for any possible gleam of redemption; finding some human moment within the anonymous slaughter. Britten's use of the First World War to address the Second is a kind of metaphor, and his music invokes the Epic mode, by relating the it to the timeless ritual of the *Requiem*. So does Jarman's addition of fictional characters, which are all the more effective for being enigmatic. The final and longest section of the class will be look at two operas set in the trenches of WW1, neither of them entirely realistic, but both looking for transcendence of just this kind.

B. CONTEXT

6. Section title B (shots from the Branagh *Magic Flute*)

7. *Magic Flute* and *Attila* DVD covers.

Those pictures were all taken from the 2012 film of *The Magic Flute* by **Sir Kenneth Branagh** (1960–), which I'll discuss in a moment. But first I want to go to the work I showed on my title slide, the production of *Attila*, a less-often performed opera from 1846 by **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901), in the production by director Davide Livermore that opened the season at La Scala in 2018. It is not hard to see why the opera is less often performed. While we all know the name of Attila the Hun, it is very hard to relate to a 5th-century thug whose context we do not understand. This is a case where updating makes a lot of sense. I think I can make the point by showing the opening in the traditional production from the DVD shown here, then the same scene from La Scala. **Ildar Abdrazakov** sings the title role in both.

8. Verdi: *Attila*, opening scene (Mariinsky)

9. Verdi: *Attila*, opening scene (La Scala)

10. — stills from the above

I don't imagine there is much point in discussing this, is there? The Russian production is OK, but entirely generic. The Milan one is full of detail, all of which affect our response to the action. But *Attila* is an opera about war and conquest anyhow; *The Magic Flute* is not only a comedy, it is often suggested as the ideal first opera for children. So what on earth was Branagh up to?

11. *The Magic Flute*, poster and bullet points

The Magic Flute (1791) was the final comedy of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91). It was written for the actor-manager **Emanuel Schikaneder**, who ran a popular suburban theater, so it was always meant to entertain. But Schikaneder was a fellow **Freemason**, and the opera is clearly intended to extol Masonic moral values. It begins with **Tamino**, a young Prince, fleeing the menacing clutches of a dragon. He is rescued by the **Three Ladies of the Queen of Night**, who show him a portrait of the Queen's daughter **Pamina**. He falls instantly in love. The Queen tells him that Pamina has been abducted by the evil wizard **Sarastro**. If Tamino can penetrate Sarastro's stronghold and rescue her, she will be his. So he starts off, and indeed enters Sarastro's domain. But then an extraordinary thing happens.

12. *The Magic Flute*, poster and bullet points, transformed

Tamino soon realizes that all he has been told is false: Sarastro is humane and good, while the Queen is evil. For Tamino and Pamina to wed, they both now have to go through a series of trials to prove themselves worthy of admittance to the Order. The final one of these is an ordeal by Fire and Water, but they come through and bring the opera to a happy ending. Now, I have done at least half a dozen *Flute* productions, and have always found it hard to maintain the right balance of fantasy and seriousness. It is a challenge for any singer and director to make Sarastro seem good without also making him a prig. The trials are hard because Mozart gives you almost nothing in the music, merely flute and timpani. And that switch of allegiance is always confusing. By giving his film a WW1 setting, I feel Branagh solves the

problems. Since the War is so serious, any incongruous element at all will seem like comedy by contrast, as you will see in the overture. Tamino's dragon is easily represented by tendril of poison gas, and the Three Ladies work splendidly as Red Cross nurses. Sarastro is presented as a doctor overseeing a field hospital, which in this context is the essence of goodness. Since War involves two sides, both Pamina and Tamino have to cross no-man-land to be together, and the trench landscape works perfectly for the trials. The singers are **Joseph Kaiser** (Tamino), **Amy Carson** (Pamina), and **René Pape** (Sarastro). The English translation is by the actor **Stephen Fry**.

- 13. Mozart: *The Magic Flute* (Branagh film), overture excerpt
- 14. Mozart: *The Magic Flute* (Branagh film), Tamino's entrance
- 15. Mozart: *The Magic Flute* (Branagh film), Sarastro, verse 2
- 16. Mozart: *The Magic Flute* (Branagh film), finale II excerpt
- 17. *The Magic Flute*, poster and bullet points

Did that work for you?

C. TRANSCENDENCE

- 18. Section title C (still from *Silent Night*)
- 19. *In Parenthesis* and *Silent Night*

From images of war used to contextualize operas from quite different periods, we turn now to two quite recent works actually set in the trenches of the First World War. *Silent Night* (2011) the Pulitzer-Prize-winning opera by my former colleague at Peabody, **Kevin Puts** (1972–) is the better-known of the two, having been produced all over the world since its premiere in Minneapolis, and scheduled for the current season at the Met. *In Parenthesis* (2016) is the third opera by the self-taught English composer **Iain Bell** (1980–); it was written for the Welsh National Opera. Other than some guest performances at the Royal Opera House in London, this particular work does not seem to have traveled, but Bell's other operas have been given major productions by leading houses all over Europe. *Silent Night* is the more successful of the two, not least because it was based on **Christian Carion's** screenplay for his 2005 film *Joyeux Noël*, so its storyline was already shaped for popular entertainment. *In Parenthesis*, though, was based upon an extraordinary prose-poem published in 1937 by the Welsh writer and artist **David Jones** (1895–1974), hailed by **TS Eliot** and others as a modernist masterpiece, but as far from conventional narrative as you could get. What makes these works so interesting for me is **how they treat time**.

- 20. The above with “Singular Moment” and “Eternal Cycle” labels

To portray the four-year experience of trench warfare on the opera stage is obviously impossible. So each of these operas takes a different approach: *Silent Night* to isolate a **singular moment**, unique but transformative; *In Parenthesis* to suspend time altogether in an **eternal cycle**.

- 21. Anna Sørensen and Lt. Spink in *Silent Night*

The singular moment in *Silent Night* is historical fact. At Christmas of 1914, the German high command sent a celebrated opera singer to sing for the troops to boost morale. Her voice was heard by the French and Scots in nearby trenches, who applauded, then spilled out into No Man's Land to share Christmas provisions, sing songs, and play soccer. That one-day Christmas Truce was never to be repeated.

22. David Jones and MS of *In Parenthesis*

David Jones was at art school in London when the War broke out. On January 2 1915, he enlisted in the **Royal Welch Fusiliers** and, after training, was sent to the Western Front. Although wounded, he was one of the few survivors of the failed attempt to capture the heavily fortified **Mametz Wood**. After recuperating in England, he was sent back to the front, where he served until 1918—longer than any other British war artist or writer. Clearly traumatized, it took him almost two decades to complete his account of his experiences, poetic rather than narrative in form.

23. Scenes from Iain Bell's *In Parenthesis*

The book focuses on the experiences of **Private Ball**, an obvious *alter ego* for the artist. Though no more than marginally competent as a soldier, Ball is a visionary, constantly connecting their experience with the diastrous defeat at the Battle of **Catraeth** in the 7th-century Welsh epic *Y Gododdin*, but also bringing in echoes of the Bible, and Shakespeare. As the action moves to the fatal encounter at Mametz Wood, in which all but he are killed, Ball's visions intensify, so that he seems no longer in a specific place and time, but part of a continuous cycle in which warriors are slain, assimilated by the earth, and regenerated as wildflowers and trees. This ending in the opera is too complex for me to play, but I will give you a substantial sequence from near the end of Act One.

24. Bullet points

I'll play a 10-minute scene from near the end of the act, immediately jumping to the act-finale, where they come under shell fire for the first time. Here are some things to look out for. Note how the realism of Bell's (and Jones's) treatment of the soldiers in the trench alternates with hints of this epic cycle, especially in the use of the two **Bards**, who serve as narrators throughout. And their prophetic lines about assimilation with the earth. Although written after *Silent Night*, this also includes a German carol, *Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen*, presumably from the German lines. But it's not plagiarism; it comes direct from the Jones, who is presumably referencing the Christmas truce of the year before. Finally, note how much use Iain Bell makes of quiet music, and how effectively this sets up his loud music by contrast, as you will hear just before the act ends. The director is David Pountney ().

25. Bell: *In Parenthesis*, first trench scene

26. Bell: *In Parenthesis*, end of Act I

27. Bullet points (repeat)

I'm pretty sure that that will have been unfamiliar to you, so I'll leave a moment for discussion.

28. Poster for *Silent Night*, Opera San José

I don't have time to play so much of *Silent Night*, by Kevin Puts and librettist **Mark Campbell**; indeed, I don't really need it, as I'll start with a synopsis of the full opera. If time (which there probably won't be), I'll play an aria by the French lieutenant **Audebert**, in which he is distracted from his record-keeping by thoughts of his wife Madeleine; the singer is **David Adam Moore**. But I will certainly end with that singular moment itself, when opera singer **Anna Sørensen (Karin Wolvertson)** comes to sing in the trenches. Although Puts and Campbell decided to call their opera *Silent Night*, the composer made the decision *not* to use the carol of that name. Instead, Sørensen sings a single line from the *Requiem*, "Dona nobis pacem," or "Give us peace," so beautifully set by Puts that you can believe this was an aria that existed long before this particular opera.

29. Puts: *Silent Night*, synopsis

30. Puts: *Silent Night*, Lt. Audebert's aria, if time

31. Puts: *Silent Night*, end of Act I

32. Class title 2 (War and Music)

It was a conscious decision on my part to end with the *Requiem* as I began. I might also note that Derek Jarman's idea of the soldier coming upon his enemy playing the piano is itself a reference to the singular moment of the Christmas Truce.