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## STUDIES

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### THE *WAR REQUIEMS* BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND DMITRI KABALEVSKY: A STORY OF DIFFERENCES

**Abstract:** In this paper we aim to compare the *War Requiem* by Dmitri Kabalevsky and the *War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten, mainly in terms of political ideology. We will suggest a different approach concerning the creation of the Kabalevsky's work as a direct answer to the West and we will try to compare the two pieces in terms of poetical text and the use of children's choir.

**Key words:** pacifism, Soviet Union, Second World War, requiem, secular.

**Апстракт:** У овом раду поредићемо *Ратни реквијем* Дмитрија Кабалевског и *Ратни реквијем* Бенцамина Бритна, пре свега на плану политичке идеологије. Предложићемо другачије тумачење настанка дела Кабалевског – као директног одговора Западу – и покушати да упоредимо два дела кроз њихове поетске текстове и начин на који користе дечји хор.

**Кључне речи:** пацифизам, Совјетски савез, Други светски рат, реквијем, световна музика

The Second World War was a catastrophic campaign that caused millions of victims all over the world. The casualties after roughly six years of war have been estimated at approximately 60 million people. One can clearly understand that this was the deadliest war campaign in absolute numbers in the history of humanity. Art, in several instances, tried to capture and describe these horrific situations through creations that were aimed either at giving a frame to a certain event or

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giving a general view of the outcome. Many works of art have juxtaposed pacifist meanings with the glorification of the victorious side or even remained focused on only one side of this balance, trying sometimes to act as political statements regarding the contemporary reality of the moment when they were presented.

The two works under consideration, the *War Requiem op. 66* by Benjamin Britten and the *Requiem op. 72* by Dmitri Kabalevsky, which was dedicated to “those who died in the fight against fascism”, belong to two different worlds by definition. Britten composed his *War Requiem* for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral on 30 May 1962, an ancient church that was destroyed during a bombing raid. On the other hand, Dmitri Kabalevsky composed, as far as we know, his own *Requiem* solely for personal purposes and not because of any type of commission.

Comparing the two pieces might seem an obvious task, although an effort of that kind has not come to my attention so far. Maybe the reason is that Dmitri Kabalevsky has not been researched thoroughly by Western musicology, especially those issues that concern his music.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Britten of course stands clearly on the other side. Many books and articles have appeared that discuss his music, and his works are being performed in concert halls all over the world. Britten’s *War Requiem* is a standard repertoire piece that has been recorded widely whereas the Kabalevsky’s work is rarely performed and the researcher will face many difficulties to locate the few available recordings of it or even a score. Our main goal will not be solely to discuss the music, although there is one main issue that we will touch upon, but to present and discuss the differences of two different spheres that are reflected in these two pieces.

Primarily, one should focus on the framework within which these two works appeared. Benjamin Britten received an informal suggestion to compose a choral and orchestral work<sup>2</sup> for the new Cathedral in Coventry. He received this invitation as early as 7 October 1958. The first draft of the piece was completed on 20 December 1961.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the information about the Kabalevsky’s work

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<sup>1</sup> His educational work and role has proved to be far more appreciated by the West, see for instance the publication of his book Dmitri Kabalevsky, *Music and education: a composer writes about musical education*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers – UNESCO, 1988. Kabalevsky was named honorary president of the International Society of Music Education for his role as a music educator within the bounds of Soviet Russia but also on an international level. See also, Mary McCarthy, *Toward a global community: the International Society of Music Education 1953 – 2003*, ISME publication, 42, accessed on 29/1/2011, [http://www.isme.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=53:isme-history-book&catid=31:other&Itemid=6](http://www.isme.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53:isme-history-book&catid=31:other&Itemid=6)

<sup>2</sup> Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Cooke, *op. cit.*, 25.

is not that precise. We know for a fact that the vocal score was composed by 4 November 1962<sup>4</sup> and that the premiere of the work took place in February 1963.<sup>5</sup> One interesting issue is that the composer fixes the period 1962–1963 as the year of its composition<sup>6</sup>, probably because the vocal score was prepared first with the full score following. This is a common practice for choral works since the composer needs to dispatch certain portions of the work to the choir and singers in order to rehearse for an upcoming performance. It becomes quite obvious that the two works seem to be following a parallel track, although Kabalevsky obviously started working on his composition much later than Britten.

The difficulties that Britten faced when he decided to ask Galina Vishnevskaya to take on the soprano solo of his piece are a well-known fact and have been thoroughly described in several sources. In brief, the English composer decided to enhance the, already obvious, pacifist message of his work by asking the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (a German), the tenor Peter Pears (an Englishman) and the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (a Soviet woman) to perform the soloist parts of his *War Requiem*. However, this was not possible due to the refusal of the Soviet authorities,<sup>7</sup> at least for the premiere of the work since Vishnevskaya was allowed to perform it on several other occasions. As it is quoted by Vishnevskaya: “Ekaterina Furtseva, the minister of culture, asked her [Vishnevskaya]: ‘How can you, a Soviet woman, stand next to a German and an Englishman and perform a political work?’”<sup>8</sup> Britten made a final attempt to reach an agreement with the Soviets but with no success. He decided to send a letter to a certain Vladimir Stepanov in the Soviet Ministry of Culture in order to ask him personally to reconsider their decision for the participation of Galina Vishnevskaya in the premiere of the work.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Britten did not succeed in an agreement being reached on this. Obviously, the Soviets thought of the matter in political terms: “[Britten] told E. M. Foster that ‘the Soviets have forbidden me to have my precious Russian soprano... the combination of Cathedral and Reconciliation with W. Germany... was too much for them.’”<sup>10</sup> This string of events seems to be leading us towards another possibility that, curiously enough, it has never been connected with the creation of Kabalevsky’s *Requiem*. We know for a fact that an

<sup>4</sup> Dmitri Kabalevsky, *War Requiem*, vocal score, Edwin F. Kalmus, 152

<sup>5</sup> Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical life in Soviet Russia*, New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1972, 429.

<sup>6</sup> Kabalevsky, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cooke, *op. cit.*, 27

<sup>8</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: a biography*, London, Faber and Faber, 1993, 409.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Vladimir Stepanov on the 14 December 1961, currently in Britten-Pears Foundation

<sup>10</sup> Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 409.

official letter was sent to Ekaterina Furtseva on 9 August 1961.<sup>11</sup> In this letter, the concept of the work was fully described to the Soviet authorities in order for them to give their approval for Vishnevskaya to participate. Dmitri Kabalevsky was already a dedicated member of the Communist Party from 1940 and as Krebs describes him: “He has become the image of the Soviet musical figure: the musical *deiatel*’. With Khachaturian, he has most faithfully served as a missionary for his country’s creative ideology... Kabalevsky perennially leads, hither and yon, delegations, another Soviet tradition. He addresses mass workers, he appears with Mongolian collective farm workers, he writes articles for the domestic and foreign newspapers and journals, he appears on television panels where he argues his view in articulate Russian, French, or English, he both receives and presents awards at festive and solemn occasions”.<sup>12</sup> Judging by the profile described above, Kabalevsky would seem an obvious choice for a composer that could have been asked by the authorities to produce a commensurate work to Britten’s in order to tell the story from the Soviet point of view. Although this suggestion cannot be proved through documents or any other written proof, I would like to suggest an explanation and say that there is a quite high probability that Kabalevsky composed his work as a direct answer to Britten’s *Requiem*, and especially in the middle of the Cold War years. The fact that Kabalevsky’s *Requiem* has not enjoyed wide success in the West probably played its role in the loose or complete absence of connection between these two works. It might be worth mentioning that when the Kabalevsky’s work was published by Kalmus, in his series of vocal scores (publication number 6269), it was actually renamed. The Kalmus’s score clearly states the title as being *War Requiem* on the cover page. One cannot be sure what the reasons were for a different title for the Western public; most probably this was a marketing move on the part of the publisher. Unfortunately, our efforts to establish a communication with Kalmus were not successful. Therefore, we cannot be sure if the composer actually agreed with this practice.

Furthermore, we would like to touch upon just two, of many, of the issues that could occur from the close examination of the two pieces. Firstly, we would like to comment on the use of poetry in both *Requiems*. Both works are profoundly secular, although Britten chooses to use parts of the Latin Mass for the Dead (Missa pro Defunctis). The two poets featured in these works are Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) for the Britten’s work and Robert Rozhdestvensky (1932–1994) for the Kabalevsky’s piece.

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<sup>11</sup> Cooke, *op. cit.*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley D. Krebs, *Soviet composers and the development of Soviet music*, London, George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1970, 255.

The choices made by the two composers bear their own symbolism. Wilfred Owen was a well-known poet who died in action during the First World War,<sup>13</sup> a war that left an indelible memory, a fatal mark and trauma that designated it as The Great War,<sup>14</sup> although the Second World War was by far the deadliest ever. Using poetry that derives directly from the years of the First World War, Britten actually conveys a holistic pacifist message to listeners. The composer wisely connected the two catastrophic periods, the two Wars, showing the futility of it from a general point of view. Britten's pacifist ideology is not something that needs to be commented on since many musicologists have dealt with it through the course of research. Pacifism is widely exposed in many of his works. Actually, his beliefs were the reason for refusing to join the Army during the Second World War campaign of the Allies.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly enough, Jim Ellis suggests: "Despite Owen's intimate and subjective portrayal of the sufferings of war, the causes of these sufferings are continually signalled in the poetry and are, in fact, made in the name of the public. 'The next war' for example, in the 'Dies Irae' section of the *Requiem*, comments on the perversity of a war that kills men in the name of national ideologies."<sup>16</sup> Britten finds the perfect material in order firstly, to depict all these catastrophic consequences that war brings, and Coventry Cathedral was one, and secondly, to make a political statement.

On the other hand, Kabalevsky arranges poetry that was written by Robert Rozhdestvensky. As it is mentioned in an obituary of the poet: "It was at this time [the time mentioned is the end of the 1950s] that Rozhdestvensky published, in the Moscow monthly magazine *Yunost* ('Youth') – around which the leading young Soviet poets gathered – his best-known collection of poems, *Rekvium* ('Re-

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on Wilfred Owen see Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen, The Truth Untold*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002 and for his writings Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments* edited by Jon Stallworthy, London, W. W. Norton, 1984 and also in the "First World War Poetry Digital Archive" from the University of Oxford, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen>

<sup>14</sup> On this matter see the writings of prominent scholars such as Jay Winter, Geoffrey Parker, Paul Fussell and others. Some indicative titles on the subject are Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, Witner, Jay, Geoffrey Parker and Mary Habeck (editors), *The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, 2000 and others.

<sup>15</sup> Cooke, *op. cit.*, 1-19.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Ellis, "Strange Meeting: Wilfred Owen, Benjamin Britten, Derek Jarman, and the *War Requiem*" in Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (editors), *Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, 283.

quiem'), a homage to the dead of the Second World War".<sup>17</sup> The poet, at the time of its composition, was thought to be one of the prominent young writers of his time. He was the member of an informal group of young poets; among them were Yevtushenko and Akhmadullina, who talked about and asked for a far more liberal environment in order for art to flourish. However, after October 1964 and the overthrow of Khrushchev, Rozhdestvensky's criticism narrowed down. It is worth mentioning that Rozhdestvensky never fell out of favour with the Soviet government. The work evolves in three distinct parts that comprise eleven different movements. The words "Eternal Glory" and "Remember" are placed in the epicentre of the poetical text and thus, in the centre of the musical text. Kabalevsky composes a glorifying work that has a clear message: to sanctify all those who fought in the Great Patriotic War, as the Second World War was described in the Soviet Union. The main question remains: is this a propaganda work? In general terms, one can answer affirmatively. There are certain moments where some hypodermic pacifist messages are stated; for instance, one can mention the verse: "In our future, there'll be no war, there'll be no fear. In our future, there'll be no suffering, there'll be no poverty".<sup>18</sup> Even in this case though, the message is propagandistic enough to show that all these can only happen within the bounds of a certain systemic world, a certain political *zeitgeist*. Kabalevsky's *Requiem*, as it happens with many of his other works, carries a political message. It comes as a political statement to whomever it concerns, probably the West.

Judging these two works in political terms one should be very cautious. The ideological world of Britten has been commented on as being that of a semi-leftist ideology sympathizer. As it is mentioned in Carpenter's book: "Rosamund Strode believes that though Britten 'went through semi-socialist periods, he wasn't really very socialist. I think he was a non-political animal, like a lot of artists'"<sup>19</sup> and on another occasion: "After Britten's death, Pears was asked whether his and Britten's political views in the post-war years had differed from those in the thirties. 'They were a little more fluid, I suppose', he answered. 'Ben... always said he could never see himself voting Conservative. He voted either Liberal or Labour all his life, and varied as to which he thought looked like the best policy at the time... He was never a member of any political party, other than the Peace Pledge Union... That was roughly my stand too'".<sup>20</sup> It seems that it would be far more

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<sup>17</sup> Jeanne Vronskaya, "Obituary: Robert Rozhdestvensky" in *The Independent*, 23 August 1994, accessed on 31/1/2011 at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-robert-rozhdestvensky-1385245.html>

<sup>18</sup> Kabalevsky, *op. cit.*, II.

<sup>19</sup> Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 486.

<sup>20</sup> Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 486.

fair to say that Britten was a pro-radical more than anything else. He was certainly not pro-communist or pro-Soviet and this was proved on an occasion after his visit to the Soviet Union in March 1963. Britten gave an interview to “*Pravda*” where “he was also quoted as saying that ‘the artist’s social duty’ was ‘to form, educate and develop [the] people’s artistic taste.’... Martin Cooper queried whether Britten had said ‘people’ or ‘the people’, and wondered whether he realized the important ideological difference between the two when speaking to Soviet citizens... Cooper suggested that readers of *Pravda* would assume from this ‘that he was in fact subscribing to the full Communist doctrine of art as an instrument of ideological propaganda’”.<sup>21</sup> Britten’s response to what *Pravda* wrote was “I was sickened by *Pravda* getting me all wrong”<sup>22</sup> since he believed that this was done on purpose. Thus, Britten’s political message in one of his most political works, the *War Requiem*, seems to be quite apart from the political message propagated by Kabalevsky’s composition. Pacifism seems to become a centralized ideological movement from where Britten starts. The differences are crystal clear. Kabalevsky composes a patriotic piece, a work of almost socialist realism that bears messages of communist superiority.

Although we focused on those features that had to do mainly with the background of the two works and not on the actual music realisations, this should not be taken as a gesture of neglect towards the pure musical features. On the contrary, I believe that there are quite a few interesting pages of music that could be further researched and compared. In this instance, it would be useful to depict just one of those points and that is the musical realisation of the text that is performed by the children’s choir. Yet again the use has different, mostly political, incentives. Britten assigns the boys’ choir in several parts of the work. However, he connects them in those parts with sacred texts. More specifically, we would like to focus on the use of the boys’ choir in the “*Libera Me*” part of his *War Requiem*. The boys’ choir only performs in the final stage of this movement, singing the “*In Paradisum*” line that is interpolated in a sense of *Cantus Firmus* juxtaposed to the other lines of the orchestra. The use of the boys’ choir is not unsuccessful: Britten creates a musical effect of children’s voices heard from a distance that refers directly to angels, especially when this is combined with the verses “let us sleep now” that are derived from Owen’s poetry. It is quite interesting to point out the use of the Lydian mode of D that the boys’ choir adopts.<sup>23</sup> The presence of the boys’ choir remains audible till near the end of the work.

In Kabalevsky’s *Requiem* the use of the children’s choir is different by default. The choir appears on three occasions: in Part II, number 8, entitled “*Our Children*”,

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<sup>21</sup> Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 418-419.

<sup>22</sup> Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 419.

<sup>23</sup> Cooke, *op. cit.*, 76.

and in two different instances in Part III, number 11, entitled “Remember”, with the second and third appearance being mostly a repeat of what was performed during the first appearance of the children’s choir, with the exception of a small part that functions as an almost final remark. Kabalevsky’s ability to write children’s music has been widely acclaimed by many and his views on the subject have been recorded on quite a few occasions.<sup>24</sup> In Kabalevsky’s *Requiem*, the children are being used in a more systemic and completely political way. Children, who represent the future, make a vow to build and create what their fathers did not build, what their fathers did not create because they died in the Great Patriotic War. Kabalevsky offers a significantly optimistic view of the future. Furthermore, one should point out the choice of the composer to use the children’s choir for proclaiming his pacifist message. Kabalevsky assigns children to utter a desperate cry to the world to “kill off the war” and to “curse the war”. This is truly the final remark that the composer seems to wish to be attributed as an aftermath, with a D Major chord being used, a far more straightforward choice than the one made by Britten, to emphatically point out those sentiments.

In comparing the performing parts of the children’s choir in the two works discussed, one can move towards a general conclusion, which really applies to the whole of the work. Britten’s aim was to complete an apolitical work, containing such political statements in as far as pacifism is a political stand, which reflects his sentiments towards human life and the devastation of war. On the other hand, Kabalevsky’s scope moves towards creating a work that superimposes the political and national sentiment first.

Finally, the truth is that these two pieces have gained, rightfully or not, their position in the repertoire and in the history of western music. Britten’s *War Requiem* is widely performed whereas the performances of Kabalevsky’s *Requiem* are rare. Probably this has to do, to some extent, with the quality of the two works but also because of the outdated messages that are revealed in Kabalevsky’s score. The Cold War years are something from the past and propaganda music needs to be of high calibre in order to continue being performed. Nevertheless, it has been quite a surprise to discover that comparisons such as the ones being presented in the corpus of this paper did not emerge much earlier. The hypothesis that Kabalevsky’s *Requiem* was informally “commissioned” by the Soviet authorities or that the composer took the initiative to “answer” the West in an analogous way cannot be confirmed definitively. However, I truly believe that the reason for Kabalevsky to compose such a work was along those lines that present him as a ded-

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance Dmitri Kabalevsky, *Music and education: a composer writes about musical education*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers and UNESCO, 1988.

icated member of the Soviet Communist Party, who knew about the intention of Britten to compose a work with this title and content.

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