



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Grant, P. & Hanna, E. (2014). Music and Remembrance. In: Lowe, D. & Joel, T. (Eds.), Remembering the First World War. (pp. 110-126). Routledge/Taylor and Francis. ISBN 9780415856287

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/16364/>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

‘Music and Remembrance: Britain and the First World War’
Dr Peter Grant (City University, UK) & Dr Emma Hanna (U. of Greenwich, UK)

Introduction

In his research using a Mass Observation study, John Sloboda found that the most valued outcome people place on listening to music is the remembrance of past events.¹ While music has been a relatively neglected area in our understanding of the cultural history and legacy of 1914-18, a number of historians are now examining the significance of the music produced both during and after the war.² This chapter analyses the scope and variety of musical responses to the war, from the time of the war itself to the present, with reference to both ‘high’ and ‘popular’ music in Britain’s remembrance of the Great War. We argue that music has not been incidental but central to remembrance and the contestation of war memory, sometimes assuming a critical role in the debate over remembrance practices. The tensions and developments in ways of remembering the war have been consistently reflected in the musical responses both of participants themselves, and subsequent generations. Since the 1960s, changes in popular music have seen the war reinterpreted through a variety of genres, often very much within the dominant cultural representation of the war, emphasising loss and futility. In this sense the majority of modern popular music follows precisely the pattern noted by Dan Todman in *The Great War: Myth and Memory* in relation to literature and film. Yet important dissident voices continue, even today, to question the accepted meanings of the war, and the sources of that wisdom, and to suggest that debate is hardly over.

It is important for historians to recognise the power of music. The emotional potency of music surpasses the capabilities of visual images or written texts; it is an intrapersonal process, a social phenomenon, and a product of cultural influences and traditions.³ In order to fully appreciate the power and impact of music in the remembering of 1914-18 it can be helpful to use existing models of understanding memory and remembrance. Maurice Halbwachs expounded his thoughts on memory practices in the 1920s, published posthumously as *On Collective Memory* (1950), and was followed by studies into historical narratives, myths, traditions, rituals and ceremonies, by theorists such as Barthes, Foucault, Lacan and Nora. Following Nora we can understand musical pieces as modes of remembrance, as *Lieux de Mémoire* (sites of memory).⁴ An interdisciplinary study of this nature may also refer to Clifford Geertz in order to understand the historical context of human behaviour by underlining that music and poetry are part of the ‘thick description’ of Britain’s modern memory of the First World War.⁵ The music inspired by the conflagration of 1914-18 reminds us of music’s capacity to ‘incite and to calm, to preach and to moralise, to jeer and to cheer, and finally to lament and to memorialise. Collectively, it offered a heady mixture that traversed the entire landscape between heaven and hell.’⁶

In this more longitudinal study, we can see that music has also been a powerful tool in setting the parameters of popular remembrance. Britain’s modern memory of the First World War has been dominated by a handful of ‘war poets’ who fought in the trenches.⁷ A relationship between music and poetry began during the early stages of the fighting, and persisted through the following decades. Thus the changing nature of the war poets’ relationship to remembrance is also reflected in the changing interaction between music and

the remembrance of the war. We discern three main phases of ‘musical memory’ which are broadly chronological:

1. Music from the war itself, a potent way for participants to recall their experiences.
2. Music written specifically to inform the practices of remembering.
3. Music as a commentary on / response to the war.

These three categories allow us to render the contest between different forms of music for public dominance in remembering the war. They also provide a foundation for tracing developments over time, showing that music has provided a forum in which the remembrance of war has been shaped, debated, consolidated and challenged for a century.

Music During the War

Music produced in Britain during the war is differentiated on one hand by ‘soldier songs’, produced both in the trenches and at home, and on the other by efforts to memorialise experiences of loss and grief. Soldier-composed songs were often based on existing popular songs or hymns and were collectively or anonymously composed usually with many variants. The gap between soldier-composed and professionally-composed songs is far closer and the two less distinct than many often think. Several songs often understood as composed in the trenches are nothing of the sort.

The coming and going between the two genres was continual. Soldiers sang the latest music-hall or variety songs at concert parties ... music-hall or variety artists adapted soldiers’ songs for commercial production; record companies rushed to record soldiers singing ‘trench songs’.⁸

The most common themes found in the songs of the war are morale-boosting, looking forward to better times ahead and the dream of home. Songs also mocked the Germans and took a sardonic view of authority, and at least 20% of soldiers’ songs were humorous in content.⁹ Remembrance as a theme is virtually absent from both soldier and professionally-composed songs: as Mullen observes, ‘the classic tone of a First World War song is jaunty, the romantic tone is rare, and the tragic is absent.’¹⁰

Yet soldiers’ experiences—and indeed civilian experiences—could also give way to much more open expressions of war’s pain in music. It is a common misconception that until Britten’s *War Requiem* ‘virtually all Anglophone composers shunned settings of the raw-edged anger expressed by Owen and Sassoon.’¹¹ Contrary to Glenn Watkins’ assertion, the first settings of Sassoon poems, ‘Butterflies’, ‘Idyll’, ‘Everyone Sang’ and ‘A Child’s Prayer’ were by Cyril Rootham in 1920-21. Rootham’s *For the Fallen* (1915) is the earliest example of the relationship between music and wartime verse. Composed just months after the poem’s publication in September 1914, his setting of Laurence Binyon’s verses was one of the first pieces of ‘formal’ or ‘classical’ music to be written on the war. Rootham was followed closely Edward Elgar’s choral setting of the same poem in *The Spirit of England* (1915-17). Elgar’s setting ultimately overshadowed Rootham’s work, though many critics thought Rootham’s ‘shows the greater respect for Binyon’s poem.’¹² Elgar also produced *Fringes of the Fleet*, featuring Kipling’s verses. And these were not simply academic pieces: Elgar’s settings were widely performed and popularly acclaimed. For his part,

Rootham's approach to the *For the Fallen* is far from celebratory or morbid but deeply contemplative and captures some of the ambiguities of the poem - death and glory - which were reprised by Rootham's pupil Arthur Bliss in *Morning Heroes* (1930).

Beyond responding to the war's poetry, the idea of composing a requiem had occurred to composers of many nationalities throughout the war, all of whom sought to shape the rites of commemoration. Most wanted to create musical memorials whose tone would be appropriate to the scale of sacrifice. In France, Maurice Ravel, who served as a truck driver near Verdun, composed *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, a suite for piano, between 1914 and 1917. *Tombeau* is a musical term, popular in the 17th century, meaning a piece written as a memorial, and Ravel dedicated each movement to a friend who had been killed in the fighting. Frederick Delius, who was too old to fight and at the outbreak of war had moved to southern England, dedicated a requiem (1914-16) to 'the memory of all young artists who have fallen in the war'. A confirmed atheist, Delius completed the half-hour long piece before his nephew was killed fighting for France in 1918. The text was written by his German Jewish friend, Heinrich Simon, who was inspired by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. The Russian composer Alexander Kastalsky's *Requiem for the Fallen Heroes of the Allied Armies* (1916) was performed in Birmingham in November 1917 under the direction of Henry Wood.¹³ Charles Villiers Stanford's organ sonata *Eroica* (1917) was followed by *At the Abbey Gate* (1918), the latter performed at the Albert Hall as the opening piece of the annual performance of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. Both these and many inter-war works varied between the personal and intimate and monumental works of collective mourning which attempted to depict the scale of the war.

Music in the Inter-War Years

Composers' efforts to grapple with the scale of sacrifice, and to engage with the intimacy of loss continued after November 1918. Gustav Holst dedicated his *Ode to Death* (1920) to the memory of his friends, particularly the composers George Butterworth, killed on the Somme in August 1916, and Cecil Coles, killed in April 1918. While British music lost several young composers, many survived the war and resumed their work. Ralph Vaughan Williams, who had served on the Western Front in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and as an Artillery officer, was deeply affected by the events he witnessed, in addition to the loss of his close friend Butterworth. As a result Vaughan Williams's musical language changed to reflect his experiences and emotions in a rapidly changing world.¹⁴ The 'Pastoral' symphony was inspired by his service in France, and was first performed in London in 1923. The use of a natural trumpet in the second movement playing out-of-tune partials are echoes of some of Vaughan Williams's wartime memories; the trumpet motif is also a mediated version of the traditional Last Post sounded every night in the trenches, and in remembrance of the fallen since 1914, played every Armistice Day and at the Menin Gate in Ypres every evening. The symphony was received with some puzzlement by both public and critics alike for its apparent one-paced approach, 'it's in four movements and they are all slow. I don't think anybody will like it much' the composer remarked.¹⁵ Fellow composer Constant Lambert, however, called it 'one of the landmarks of modern English music' and it led to Vaughan Williams's first invitation to the USA where he conducted a performance with the New York Symphony Orchestra.¹⁶

Besides the persistence of personal tributes to the dead, we also see much more ambitious efforts to shape public remembrance of the war through music. The composer John Foulds's war service involved dedicating a large part of his time to the musical activities of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). The charity had been quick to recognise the power of music to Britain's war effort, and their Music Department's motto - 'Whatever cheers the warrior helps to win the war' – underpinned their wartime mission.¹⁷ It was during his time with the YMCA that Foulds composed his *World Requiem*. This was to be the largest composition he would write both in terms of length and the unprecedented number of performers required. It would be the centrepiece of the first commemorative musical event staged at the Royal Albert Hall on Armistice Night 1923. It was organised by Foulds and his partner, the musician Maud MacCarthy. MacCarthy was an Irish-born professional violinist with links to prominent Socialists and members of the Suffragette movement.¹⁸ This led them to compile a text that attempted a universal, non-denominational pacifism which, in turn, later caused problems for the reception of the work. The phrase 'Festival of Commemoration' was first used by MacCarthy, who appears to have been the driving force behind the Albert Hall Armistice Night concerts in the mid-1920s. Foulds and MacCarthy remain relatively neglected figures despite their key roles in establishing the ways in which the war was remembered in the early 1920s.¹⁹

The *World Requiem* was a monument in musical form, and ambitious both in its production and its seeking of a wide audience. The citation in the score reads 'A tribute to the memory of the Dead – a message of consolation to the bereaved of all countries'. A presentation copy of the programme is entitled 'A Cenotaph in Sound. In Memory 1914-18'.²⁰ With a running length of approximately two hours, it was written for 1200 singers and instrumentalists. The piece used texts from multiple literary sources, including the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hindu poetry and some contemporary free verse; it made use of both Foulds's pioneering of the quarter-tone, and a Middle Eastern instrument called the Sistrum.

Foulds had some success in his aims. In the spring of 1921 he submitted his *World Requiem* to the British Music Society, an organisation of prominent English musicians including Adrian Boult, Arnold Bax, and Arthur Bliss. After some consideration they informed Foulds that the Committee would allow *World Requiem* to be given under auspices of the British Music Society. The committee secretary reported that they

lay great stress on the advisability of giving the work in a Cathedral, in preference to a performance in a concert room. Should it be possible to arrange such a performance in St. Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey they will do all they can to make the event a national one [...] we were very much impressed with the work and feel sure that it will not be unworthy of the great occasion.²¹

Indeed, it was suggested that the *World Requiem* should be performed in Westminster Abbey in November 1921.²² Such a debut did not occur but the Society supported the first performance, along with the British Legion who adopted the composition for the Armistice Night performance at the Royal Albert Hall in 1923. It was agreed that royalties from the annual Armistice Night performances would be donated to the Legion for an initial term of five years.²³ In 1924 there were discussions about performances of the *World Requiem*

taking place in Seattle, Vancouver, Sydney and Bombay. BBC radio broadcasts were also mooted.

The piece was not only heard but performed at much more local levels. Ahead of the second performance of the *World Requiem* at the Royal Albert Hall on Armistice Night 1924, Douglas Haig requested that it should be performed by regional choirs throughout the United Kingdom every Armistice Day to bring the nation together in a communal act of remembrance, and to raise money for the welfare of ex-servicemen and their dependents. Haig asked local choirs

to establish and maintain in your district annual Festival Commemoration Performances of all or portions of this work, in aid of my appeal for ex-servicemen of all ranks, their dependents and the widows and orphans of the fallen. Such performances [...] would at the same time constitute social musical events in honour of those who fell in the Great War.²⁴

Haig's encouragement spoke to the power of music in British popular culture and, more specifically, in remembrance of the war itself. The work received a positive public reception in more traditional ways, too, as *The Times* reviewer commented favourably: 'in the opinion of many musical connoisseurs the "World Requiem" has met the need of a national memorial in poetry and music, and has truly been called "a Cenotaph in sound".'²⁵ In this sense, such memorials in music should not be considered incidental accompaniments to other forms of remembering, but a form with the potential for a genuine mass audience, especially via broadcast radio. By 1925 the *British Legion* magazine asserted that 'Never before has the whole Nation – nay the whole Empire – shown itself so completely in unison in its desire to do homage to the dead whilst assisting the living.'²⁶

Yet Foulds' and MacCarthy's efforts did not proceed without controversy, especially over what was appropriate to remembrance, and whose memories the music of remembrance would privilege. At first the *World Requiem* was enthusiastically received as a key element in the Festival of Remembrance itself; however, as the 1920s progressed it fell out of favour, its sombre tone not entirely in keeping with what was thought appropriate, notably by the British Legion who had agreed to sponsor the performance. By 1927, the ways in which Britain publicly commemorated the war was a matter of considerable contention between those who wanted to mourn set against a considerable number of veterans who wished to celebrate their survival. The first Armistice Nights had often been 'celebrated' with the playing of 'Armistice Jazz' concerts and balls. Author and former officer Charles Carrington recalled that

the Feast-Day became a Fast-Day and one could hardly go brawling on the Sabbath. The do-gooders captured the Armistice, and the British Legion seemed to make its principal outing a day of mourning [...] many soldiers found it increasingly discomfoting, year by year.²⁷

The role of music in remembrance was at the heart of this debate. Throughout the 1920s the national newspapers, notably the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, disputed the appropriate tone of Armistice Day, set against a backdrop of class antagonism, unemployment, strikes and economic instability. Previous celebrations had been deemed too elitist and favouring

those who could afford travel to London.²⁸ By 1927 the Home Office, War Office and Admiralty agreed that the ex-service community should be more fully represented at the Cenotaph, and British Legion Headquarters were asked to organise an ex-servicemen's parade past the monument.²⁹ 'Leading figures of Britain's musical establishment no longer deemed Foulds's piece appropriate as the nation's musical memorial.' Foulds's work was deemed too middle brow for the establishment and too 'high' for many of the veterans and the general public. While MacCarthy was convinced there had been 'back door business' to discredit Foulds, the accounts of the British Legion also suggest that the piece was too expensive to produce and was running at a considerable financial loss.³⁰

In 1927 the *Daily Express* secured the Royal Albert Hall for its own Armistice Night concert. The paper's two year sponsorship of the event marks a clear, but temporary, change in tone of the character of British national remembrance and was described as a 'rally' which featured the 'community singing' of old wartime songs. Huge demand for tickets indicated not only the strength of nostalgia for wartime bonds, but the importance of music in facilitating it. Places were limited to those who had served in war areas and British Legion Headquarters allotted seats for the event by Divisions, 'a system which provided many instances of men meeting again, war-time pals whose very existence had in some cases been forgotten since a "blighty" had parted them "somewhere on the Western" or other "Front".'³¹ The centrality of music to remembering becomes clear in writer and veteran H.V. Morton's response. His review of the event bubbled over with nostalgia as he described ten thousand people, the majority men, in the Albert Hall under flags which had been used in the war. The pageantry was only part of the equation, though. Once the music started – with *Pack Up Your Troubles* – Morton and his fellow ex-servicemen

found ourselves back in 1914 [...] We did not realise until last night that the songs we sang in the Army are bits of history. In them is embalmed that comic fatalism which carried us through four years of hell. [...] above all, the memory of the men we knew so well, men better than we were, nobler, finer, more worthy of life, who slipped into the silence of death.³²

Morton concluded with the plea that the event 'must not die. It must become part of Armistice Day. Every year we must sing these songs again. In singing them we draw nearer to the men who died; in singing them we show to the world a thing that is visible only once a year – the splendid heart of England.'³³

The contest over the appropriate music of public remembrance was hardly decided by the ascendancy of soldiers' nostalgia in the Legion's Armistice Night singing. The BBC continued to broadcast the Armistice Night singing every year from 1927, but by 1936 the Corporation's officials referred to the annual event as a 'British Legion sing-song'. An internal memo in the BBC archives suggested that more sombre music should be played along with readings from the Bible to 'wash out the taste of the super-sentimental orgy from the Albert Hall and reset the frame for these readings.'³⁴

More in line with this sentiment was Arthur Bliss's *Morning Heroes*, which was first performed in 1930. In a similar vein to Foulds' *World Requiem* it contains a mixture of textual sources, including the first musical setting of a Wilfred Owen poem (*Spring Offensive*) as well as extracts from fellow war poet Robert Nichols, the *Iliad* and poems by

Walt Whitman and Li-tai-Po.³⁵ Bliss was himself a veteran of the trenches and his diaries are no less candid than many more well-known memoirs. Bliss's wartime service had already found its way into his incidental music composed for a 1921 production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. After the loss of his brother on the Somme, Bliss suffered from survivor's guilt coupled with frequent nightmares in which he was back in the trenches even though 'we knew the armistice had been signed'. Composing *Morning Heroes* was thus a cathartic experience that proved effective in ridding him of the flashbacks.

Morning Heroes is thoroughly immersed in allusions and emotions which writers, following Fussell, have claimed had fallen out of common currency by the time of the work's composition. Despite referencing Owen, Bliss's music was more equivocal on how the war ought to be remembered than later and more culturally dominant texts would suggest. The juxtaposition of the *Iliad* extracts with the more nuanced poems of Walt Whitman together with those of Owen and Nichols provides contrasting views of war, even though Bliss's choice of poem is one of Owen's more reflective. Representing these 'two sides' of the war was very common in the immediate post-war period, and we also encounter it with regard to wartime cinema.³⁶ Contemporary reviewers regarded this as a strength, and praised the mixture of texts as 'natural and right'. They found 'shifting emphasis from the personal to the collective experience of war, and their reflection of Bliss the man' appropriate in the musical structure.³⁷ Bliss was himself very well aware of the possible controversy the use of Homeric texts might have:

A few may even call it a glorification of war ... I make no defence of my choice of this subject, as I have no political views to put forward, no moral prejudices to air, no theories indeed of any kind to expound. I have been guided entirely by my aims as an artist, for whom other considerations than the aesthetic do not exist... War begins with glamour as surely as it ends with the reckoning; and perhaps the end of war will not come till by some miracle we can reverse the order, and see the bill first.³⁸

In the early 21st century Bliss's romanticism and ideas of beauty can sound inappropriate and outdated. Yet the persistence of more traditional forms is understandable in the sense that it offered comfort. It is telling that, for example, both Arthur Bliss in *Morning Heroes* and Ralph Vaughan Williams (*A Pastoral Symphony*), both of them war veterans, utilised a pastoral mode in their work rather than turning to more modernist forms.³⁹ Bliss was seeking for that comfort in his work, and to express the inverse of so much suffering at the front: 'I found in France, as so many others did, that the appreciation of a moment's beauty had been greatly intensified by the sordid contrast around ... the sheer joy of being alive was the more relished for there being the continual possibility of sudden death.'⁴⁰

Post-1945

The public dimensions of the struggle over war memory through interwar music were assured by the centrality of music to public services and festivals. Yet remembering the war had little or no resonance in the popular music of the period. The most popular music genres of the day - ragtime, jazz and, later, swing and 'crooner' ballads - did not lend themselves to contemplation of historical themes. This was the province of the folk or

protest song, or occasionally the comic song, which in the 1920s and 1930s were more concerned with political issues such as unemployment. The advent of a second world war, saw the resurrection of some tunes and scatological soldier songs of 1914-18, amid the new conflict's more sadly sentimental strains of *We'll Meet Again*. Besides that brief resumption, the music of the Great War would not be revisited on any scale until the 1960s and the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict. The popular music hall ditties and soldiers' songs returned to ironic effect in Theatre Workshop's *Oh What a Lovely War*, developed into a film of the same name in 1969, to the extent that we might struggle to appreciate their once genuine popularity.

The fate of Foulds's and Bliss's efforts were sealed earlier, first by their inability to meet the mood of commemoration after 1945, and then more emphatically by Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (1962). *War Requiem* has become Britain's accepted 'cenotaph of sound', due in great part to Britten's setting of Wilfred Owen's poetry which, since the 1960s, has been privileged as the British voice of 1914-18, though it was written to mark the experience of 1939-45. Britten had been a self-exiled conscientious objector during the war, and his career by the late 1950s was only then recovering. It may well have been Britten's pacifism, perfectly suited to the anti-war mood of the post-1945 world, that led the Arts Committee at Coventry Cathedral to invite him in 1958 to write something for the consecration of the new cathedral.⁴¹ Destroyed by *Luftwaffe* bombs in November 1940, Coventry's modern cathedral would open in May 1962 with the first performance of the *War Requiem*. Britten's piece juxtaposed popular war songs and religious texts with the addition of poetry by Wilfred Owen as tropes to the Latin Requiem Mass. His choice of the poetry of the Great War helped the piece to transcend its immediate origins: not only were further performances in Dresden contemplated, but also at that iconic site of Britain's Great War, Ypres.⁴²

The *War Requiem* came before the majority of the 1960s cultural works that cemented the popular view of the war as 'useless slaughter' and its 'message' is clearly one of universal abhorrence of war rather than being a specific critique of 1914-18. The power of Britten's work in setting the parameters of 'serious' music that has followed, in multiple genres, cannot be underestimated, though we should note that it was only one of many factors in the transformation of war memory occurring in the 1960s. These included not only the fiftieth anniversary of the war and a spate of publications, but the war generation themselves entering retirement, and their children becoming more interested in elements of parents' lives which had often been hidden.⁴³

Following the 50th anniversary of the war, the late 1960s witnessed a significant flowering of musical endeavours contemplating 1914-18, and a definite shift to a conception of the war which left little room for levity in its remembrance. That transition becomes clearer when we note that the first notable post-1945 newly composed popular song in Britain about the First World War is Flanders and Swann's *The War of 14-18* (1967) which combines elements of music hall (though filtered through a middle class lens) and is a loose translation of a French *chanson* by Georges Brassens. Also one of the first anti-Vietnam War songs, it was released as a single with *Twenty Tons of TNT*, another humorous anti-war song, on the reverse. Flanders and Swann were hardly obscure artists, but the tenor of the record was out of kilter with what became the dominant voice of the 1960s. *Oh What a Lovely War* infused the music of the war itself with deep and angry irony, and the folk

genre reflected the shift clearly, as it turned to the war as a tragedy, in which the world before 1914 was lost. Ralph McTell's *England 1914* (1969) takes up Edward Grey's supposed comment on the 'lamps going out all over Europe.' Set on the eve of war 'the gas-lamps stand like soldiers; His warnings to the wind', but McTell goes on to suggest that with virtually continuous conflict somewhere since 1914 the lamps have never been re-lit. In the same year Sussex folk singer Shirley Collins' highly innovative *Anthems in Eden* took up the concept of a 'lost' England. Stringing together a number of well-known English folk songs, including *The Blacksmith*, *Lowlands Away* and *Staines Morris*, the climax of the work is *Dancing at Whitsun*: a song of remembrance and loss where 'The fields they are empty' with 'No young men to tend them' as they have been 'wasted in battle'.

Rock musicians were also in contemplative mood regarding the Great War. In the late 1960s, developments in popular music, under the influence of pioneers such as Bob Dylan and The Beatles, saw the lyrical content of songs become more diverse and this has meant a much more willing engagement with war in popular music. Treatment of the Great War in song could invoke further shifts: very frequently bands and singers take on a different persona when it comes to their songs about the war, often reverting to a more folk-based approach considered suitable for the subject. The Zombies' *Butcher's Tale* (*Western Front 1914*) – actually set in 1916 during the Battle of the Somme and attacking pro-war Anglican clergymen familiar from the poems of Sassoon and the Attenborough film – is significantly different to the soft, psychedelic rock of the rest of the album on which it features. Some were thinking on grander scales than individual songs. The Pretty Things' seminal 1968 album *S.F. Sorrow*, often described as the first 'rock opera' or even the first concept album, tells the story of a twentieth century 'everyman' including his participation in a war that, chronologically, has to be the First World War. The following year The Kinks released their concept album *Arthur (or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)* which, as the title suggests, attempted to chart the story of Britain from 1914 to the present. The songs describe the England Arthur once knew, and in dealing with the war *Yes Sir, No Sir* tells of the individuality that is left behind when the soldier volunteers, or is called up. With a reference to another famous war song Ray Davies skilfully sums up the plight of the recruit: 'Pack up your ambition in your old kit bag'. *Some Mother's Son* refers to the death of Arthur's brother in the war, a sign again of rock's maturing, and of the terms in which the war could be addressed.

Since these pioneering contributions there has been a steady stream of songs that make reference to the war. Significant artists, whose styles range from punk to progressive rock to death metal, include Billy Childish, whose songs often have both musical and lyrical references to wartime satire and music hall, and Gary Miller, formerly of the Whisky Priests.⁴⁴ Since the mid-2000s there has been a very significant increase in output: the average number of songs released annually worldwide about the war prior to 2003 was under 20. Since then it has often been above 100 a year. This has largely been due to the development of new musical genres that are easy to self-produce (often a single person with just a keyboard and a computer), possible to make widely available (via the internet) and accept the war as potential source material. Commercially, the trend is similar: a search of iTunes or the Amazon music store reveals well over a hundred songs related to Remembrance Day alone and an equal number of albums. They contain selections that have been anthologised as appropriate for remembrance in general or Remembrance Day itself, from readings of the war poets, through 'great classics' (such as Holst's *Planet Suite* or

Faure's *Requiem*) to *Flowers of the Forest*, *Amazing Grace* and Ennio Morricone's *Cavatina*. Often they are explicitly released for incorporation within group or personal acts of remembrance around 11 November or as fund raisers for military charities (*Music for Heroes* or *The Poppy Girls* both 2013 for example). Of the ten best selling recordings of Britten's *War Requiem* on Amazon, no fewer than six were recorded in 2012 and 2013.

While one might easily point out that the musical approach to the Great War is almost universally serious, this does not necessarily mean uncritical, and that there is no differentiation in attitudes towards war and its remembrance in contemporary music. One trend is easy enough to trace, echoing as it does the popular sentiments surrounding remembrance as it has developed over the past several decades. Among those to take a reverential tone in remembering the war are former Dire Straits frontman Mark Knopfler's *Remembrance Day* (2009) which features his distinctive guitar style in a slow, pastoral elegy about those servicemen who lost their lives from a single English village. In similar vein Radiohead's *Harry Patch (In Memory of)*, recorded shortly before Patch's death in 2009, adapts Patch's words and features Thom Yorke's vocals against a relatively simple string arrangement by Jonny Greenwood. All proceeds were donated to the Royal British Legion, and its critical reception was often laudatory. Marc Richardson compared it musically to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* whose melancholy strains have accompanied many solemn cultural events from Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* to commemorations of 9/11.⁴⁵ Luke Lewis in *New Musical Express* and Simon Vozick-Levinson in *Entertainment Weekly* both saw resemblances with Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'.⁴⁶

Others continue to mine the rich vein of myth of the 1914 Christmas truce. The Buff Medways – one of Billy Childish's bands - *Merry Christmas Fritz* (2003) is only one in a long line that includes Jona Lewie's anti-war novelty hit *Stop the Cavalry* (1980), Paul McCartney's *Pipes of Peace* (1983) and The Farm's *All Together Now* (1990). In more serious music the theme persists too: Kenneth Putz's Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *Silent Night* was based on the 1914 Christmas truce, and inspired by Christian Carion's 2005 film *Joyeux Noel*. So embedded has the literary conception of the war become that the Pulitzer officials described *Silent Night* as 'a stirring opera that recounts the *true* story of a spontaneous cease-fire among Scottish, French and Germans during World War I, displaying versatility of style and cutting straight to the heart' (our emphasis).⁴⁷ Putz has been creative in having the truce initiated by a pair of opera-singers, one a Swedish soprano, though what survives is the dominant tale of an unsympathetic higher command, and the futility of the struggle.

Whilst these examples remain firmly within the dominant discourse of remembrance there are also a number of songs that take Remembrance Day as a starting point for a sharp critique of remembering the war, though they too tend to remain within the idiom of the war poets. These stretch back to the late 1970s when punk rock emerged. Of several punk bands to cover the topic are Bristol-based Disorder on their 1983 EP *Perdition*. They sandwich a trip to the trenches in all its blood and gore between a cynical pair of verses 'on Poppy Day' with 'polished medals on display' in a raw and bitter snarl of rage against the waste of human life and its sanitisation in the modern ceremony. Veteran folk/protest singer Leon Rosselson takes the same material but approaches it from an ironic, blackly humorous standpoint. His *Remembrance Day* (2009) is set at the annual Cenotaph ceremony attended

by the Queen and dignitaries. As the two minutes silence begins the narrator hears a voice rising up that represents 'the voice of the fallen'. In many hands this 'ghost' would deliver portentous words of warning or tendentious political slogans. In Rosselson's the voice of the dead soldier rejects the ceremony and exclaims 'stuff it up your arse'. This song is one of few popular songs to capture the black humour of soldiers' songs of the trenches. Even it suggests the hypocrisy of the occasion as 'a strange aroma of corpses hung round the Cenotaph' Rosselson's characteristically good natured delivery and rather jaunty tune retains the ironic humour.

Though several of the above songs begin to question received views of the war and its modern memory, there are two British artists in particular whose work stands out as going a step further to re-configure the myths into a new artistic statement. In the mid-1980s together with bands such as Napalm Death and Carcass, Bolt Thrower 'combined punk and early death metal to develop an extreme sound that has been widely influential.'⁴⁸ They have built their career around songs relating to war in its varying forms, both in fantasy and reality.⁴⁹ Two albums in particular, *For Victory* (1994) and *Those Once Loyal* (2005) focus on the Great War. The artwork of the latter features Gilbert Ledward's highly realistic frieze of an 18-pounder gun in action from the Guards Memorial in St James Park, London. Bolt Thrower's contemplation of war in general, and the Great War in particular, is both complex and distinctive. They avoid simple stereotypes and instead express the ambiguities of warfare, as horrifying and exhilarating, insane and necessary. Similar ambiguities occur in the works of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen who both wrote of their utter contempt for the mindlessness of war but both remained (or returned) to their regiments and fought with distinction. In this sense Bolt Thrower are probably more representative of the totality of Owen and Sassoon's work than virtually any other artists and they go beyond simply raging against war and its destructiveness. They are hinting at constructive, co-operative alternatives, returning to representations of the war more akin to those of Foulds or Bliss.

There are signs too that popular music can move beyond the parameters of remembering set by the war poets, and interrogate modern Britain's relationship with the Great War. Award-winning singer/songwriter P. J. Harvey wrote her 2011 album *Let England Shake* after spending a considerable time researching the history of war, most notably the Gallipoli campaign, as well as more recent first-hand accounts from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵⁰ The album received critical acclaim as a serious commentary on both war and England's military past.⁵¹ Critic Dorian Lynskey called it 'an eloquent and multivalent song suite about war and national identity, drawing inspiration from poems, paintings, diaries and news reports.'⁵² Perhaps more pleasing for Harvey was the story of 'an old soldier ... who served as an officer in Northern Ireland, [who] was deeply struck by how vividly the album conveyed military experience, describing Harvey ... as "the first rock-and-roll war artist".'⁵³

Let England Shake is one of the very few examples of rock music that is able to approach the complexity of Foulds and Britten, and by extension the war itself. A lingering pride in the country's military achievements is yet accompanied by Harvey's questioning of the role of memory and remembrance. *The Glorious Land* states 'our land is ploughed by tanks and feet, feet marching', and while *Hanging in the Wire* references typical Great War imagery, Harvey still escapes the 'straight jacket' of cultural myth that has ensnared so many

performers. Part of the reason is that her sources are not the obvious ones. Among her influences were the work of Harold Pinter, the poetry of T.S. Eliot, the paintings of Salvador Dali and Goya as well as music by The Doors, Velvet Underground and the Pogues.⁵⁴ Notable by their absence are the war poets. Indeed, Harvey's interrogation of remembrance becomes much more direct: *On Battleship Hill* examines the emotions of 'battlefield tourists' today. In a Proustian image the song links the scent of wild thyme with the recognition that over the years even the destruction wrought by the First World War is being eradicated by nature. Its pastoral imagery links time and remembrance in a complex relationship: should we remember or make a conscious decision to forget? Because the song directly reflects the experience of today's tourists it has powerful resonance as it challenges the motives for such 'pilgrimages'. Do we visit the sites of former conflicts for positive or negative reasons? Are we 'bearers of the flame' or mere ghouls? What exactly should we remember?

Conclusion

Since the early 1960s Britten's *War Requiem* has become the paradigm for musicians in both classical and popular genres of music. It has also contributed its part to the popular myth of the war as a futile slaughter, helping to further sanctify a small number of selected poems by Owen, Sassoon and others as key reference points. As recent performances show, the work is still emotionally potent for audiences: 'tears threatened to become sobs, and self-restraint made just listening hard work.'⁵⁵ Nevertheless, *War Requiem* and so much of the continuing musical response to the Great War operates within the constraints of a popular memory defined by the war poets. Only occasionally have musicians broken free from 'the weight of silent dead', as P. J. Harvey puts it, to produce works that challenge or question the cultural norm. They remind us that music too is a powerful medium through which the remembrance of the Great War has been shaped and challenged for a century, and that the nature of war memory has never been so solid as the canon of remembrance music might suggest. During the years of the war's centenary, BBC Radio 2 has commissioned 'The Ballads of the Great War' which will showcase 50 specially commissioned new songs by the cream of British folk songwriters. This is a continuation of the trend which sees popular, rather than classical artists, leading the way and, in their very different styles, contemporary musicians may be in the vanguard of a group of revisionist artists who are working in parallel with the scholarship of the revisionist historians of the last 20 years.

¹ John Sloboda, 'Everyday Uses of Music Listening: A Preliminary Survey', in *Music, Mind and Science*, Suk Won Yi (ed.), Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1999, p.354-5.

² Kate Kennedy and Trudi Tate, 'Literature and Music of the First World War', *First World War Studies*, Vol.2, Issue 1, 2011. Exceptions include Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876-1953*, Manchester: MUP, 2002; J.F.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1990; Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War*, California: University of California Press, 2003.

³ Nico Frijda's Foreword in Patrick N. Juslin & John A. Sloboda (eds), *Handbooks of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, Oxford: OUP, 2010. Also see Tia DeNora, 'Emotion as Social Emergence: Perspectives from Music Sociology' in Patrick N. Juslin & John A. Sloboda (eds), *Handbooks of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp.159-160

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969, and the multi-volume work by Pierre Nora (ed) *Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-92)

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973

-
- ⁶ Watkins, p.7
- ⁷ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford: OUP, 1975; Martin Stephen, *The Price of Pity*, London: Leo Cooper, 1996; Stephen Badsey, 'Blackadder Goes Forth and the Two Western Fronts Debate', in Graham Roberts and Philip M. Taylor (eds), *The Historian, Television and Television History*, Luton: Luton University Press, 2001; Dan Todman, *The Great War, Myth and Memory*, London: Hambledon, 2005.
- ⁸ Ibid. p.7
- ⁹ John Mullen, 'Popular song in Britain during the two world wars', 2008, <http://www.jcmullen.fr/twoworldwars.pdf>, p.7; John Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.209
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p.26
- ¹¹ Watkins, *Proof Through the Night*, p.49
- ¹² Daniel M. Grimley, 'Music in the midst of desolation: structures of mourning in Elgar's *The Spirit of England*' in *Elgar Studies*, Edited by J. P. E. Harper-Scott and Julian Rushton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.225. A.J.B. Hutchings, 'The Music of Cyril Bradley Rootham', *The Musical Times*, 79: 1139, January 1938, p.20. Diana McVeagh, 'Edward Elgar' in *The New Grove: Twentieth Century English Masters*, London and Basingstoke, Papermac, 1986, p.19
- ¹³ Glen Watkins, Op.Cit., p.422
- ¹⁴ Wilfrid Mellers, *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*, London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989, pp. 260-261
- ¹⁵ James Day, *The Master Musicians: Vaughan Williams*, J.M. Dent: London, revised edition, 1975, pp. 38 and 44. Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams*, London: Phoenix, 2000, p.56.
- ¹⁶ Hubert Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams*, London: George G Harrap, 1950, p.51.
- ¹⁷ Cadbury Research Library, YMCA/K/6/1: Motto of the YMCA Music Department as quoted by Percy A. Scholes, 'Music and the Fighting Man', *The Red Triangle*, September 1917 – August 1918, Vol.2, pp.191-3.
- ¹⁸ Malcolm MacDonald, *John Foulds: his life in music*, Rickmansworth: Triad Press, 1975
- ¹⁹ The *World Requiem* is given a cursory mention in Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined: The First World War in English Culture*, London: Bodley Head, 1990, pp.275-6, and also a brief mention in Watkins, p.422 and Richards, pp.159-160. Also see James G. Mansell, 'Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance, 1923-1927', *The Historical Journal*, 52: 2, (2009), pp.433-454
- ²⁰ BBC Written Archives Centre: Composer John Foulds, 1924-38, File I
- ²¹ British Library Manuscripts 56482: Letter from A. Eaglefield Hull, Hon. Director, British Music Society, 29th April 1921
- ²² British Library Manuscripts 56482: Letter from Arthur Snow to John Foulds, 15 March 1921
- ²³ Malcolm MacDonald, *John Foulds: his life in music*, Triad Press: Rickmansworth, 1975, p.26
- ²⁴ British Library Manuscripts 56482: Letter from Douglas Haig (Appeal Department, British Legion) to Secretary of a Musical Competition Festival
- ²⁵ MacCarthy-Foulds Papers - Borthwick Archive: *The Times*, 10 November 1924, p.19.
- ²⁶ *British Legion*, Vol.5, No.6. p.1
- ²⁷ Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*. London: Hutchinson, 1965, p.258.
- ²⁸ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946*, Oxford: Berg, 1994
- ²⁹ Royal British Legion: General Secretary's Monthly Circular for November 1927 and *British Legion*, Vol.7, No.5, November 1927 p.1
- ³⁰ BBC Written Archives Centre: Composer John Foulds 1924-38, File I, Letter from Maud Foulds to Mr Boulton, 9 December 1931
- ³¹ *British Legion*, Vol.7. No.6, December 1927, p.1
- ³² Ibid, p.149
- ³³ Ibid, p.149
- ³⁴ BBC Written Archives Centre: internal memo, A.D.M. to Herbage and Reybould, 21 August 1936, R 34/227/2
- ³⁵ Owen's poetry (as well as that of Sassoon, Brooke, Binyon, Graves and others) was also included in BBC Remembrance Day broadcasts from 1930. Gregory, p.139.
- ³⁶ See several of the contributions to Michael Hammond and Michael Williams (eds) *British Silent Cinema and the Great War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011
- ³⁷ 'H.G.', "'Morning Heroes": A new symphony by Arthur Bliss', *The Musical Times*, 71: 1052, 1 October 1930, Extracts from Arthur Bliss's war diary of 1915 quoted in Andrew Burn, "'Now, Trumpeter for thy Close" The Symphony "Morning Heroes": Bliss's requiem for his brother', *The Musical Times*, 126: 1713, November 1938, 666.

-
- ³⁸ ‘H.G.’, ‘“Morning Heroes”: A new symphony by Arthur Bliss’, *The Musical Times*, 71: 1052, 1 October 1930.
- ³⁹ Eric Saylor “It’s Not Lambkins Frisking At All”: English Pastoral Music and the Great War’, *Musical Quarterly*, 91: 1/2 Spring/Summer, 2008, 40-1.
- ⁴⁰ Extracts from Arthur Bliss’s war diary of 1915 quoted in Andrew Burn, “Now, Trumpeter for thy Close” The Symphony “Morning Heroes”: Bliss’s requiem for his brother’, *The Musical Times*, 126: 1713, November 1938, 666. Quoted in Saylor (2008) p.43
- ⁴¹ Britten-Pears Foundation: Correspondence – Benjamin Britten to Coventry Cathedral Provost, R.11: Letter from BB to John Lowe (BBC, Birmingham) 8 October 1958
- ⁴² Britten-Pears Foundation: Correspondence – Folder 2 – Coventry Cathedral correspondence, R.11: Letter from BB to Provost of Coventry Cathedral 13 October 1965 and Letter from BB to Hans Keller 14 December 1965
- ⁴³ Todman, p. 29.
- ⁴⁴ <http://www.garymillersongs.com/reflections-war.php>, accessed on 16/11/12
- ⁴⁵ Wikipedia entry [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Patch_\(In_Memory_Of\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Patch_(In_Memory_Of)), accessed on 16/11/12.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid
- ⁴⁷ Tom Huizenga, ‘Kevin Puts Wins Music Pulitzer For World War I Opera “Silent Night”’, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/deceptivecadence/2012/04/16/150764941/kevin-puts-wins-music-pulitzer-for-world-war-i-opera-silent-night>, accessed on 7/1/14.
- ⁴⁸ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Oxford: Berg, 2007, p.109.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, pp.36-7.
- ⁵⁰ ‘Local Rock Star P.J. Harvey Talks to *The News*’, *Bridport and Lyme Regis News*, 26 January 2011.
- ⁵¹ It was named ‘album of the year’ by 16 publications and won the prestigious Mercury Prize for 2011. <http://www.metacritic.com/feature/music-critic-top-ten-lists-best-albums-of-2011?tag=supplementary-nav;article;2> accessed 11/11/12. It was not quite so commercially successful peaking at #8 in the UK and 32 in the US album charts.
- ⁵² Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs*, London: Faber and Faber, 2012, p.684.
- ⁵³ Neil McCormick, ‘P.J Harvey: Masterpiece of the first rock-and-roll war artist’, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 July 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpop/features/8650329/P.J-Harvey-Masterpiece-of-the-first-rock-and-roll-war-artist.html>, accessed 15/3/13.
- ⁵⁴ *Bridport and Lyme Regis News* (2011).
- ⁵⁵ David Nice, ‘War Requiem, BBCSO, Bychkov, Royal Albert Hall’, the arts desk.com, 11 November, 2013, <http://www.theartsdesk.com/classical-music/war-requiem-bbcso-bychkov-royal-albert-hall>. Accessed 7/1/14