2015.16 MSO Teen Series

Dona Nobis Pacem

GUIDE

FEBRUARY 17, 2016
UIHLEIN HALL

Street art, Kabul, Afghanistan
Panel of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, designed by Maya Lin, displaying names of fallen U.S. service members.
We welcome our 2016 Teen Choral Partners for this performance:

Germantown High School Concert Choir, Jonathan Brooks, Director
Manitowoc Lincoln High School Chamber Choir, David Bowman, Director
Mukwonago High School Concert Chorale, Charlotte R. W. Kolby, Director
Plymouth High School Concert Choir, Amanda Gaura, Director

Art and War

Does art make any difference in the world? Or is it just a diversion, a kind of pleasant “entertainment,” safely insulated from the ugliness of the real world? This is a question many artists — poets, playwrights, painters, composers, and any creative artist — must wrestle with. Will my work make any real difference?

In 1936, Ralph Vaughan Williams was England’s most famous composer, known throughout the world for his powerful symphonies and profoundly spiritual works like Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis and The Lark Ascending. Vaughan Williams was also a man of firm moral convictions and a sense of duty, deeply committed to the idea that artists could and should influence their society. He once wrote: “A composer must not shut himself up and think about art, he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community (on both sides of the Atlantic).”

The world was changing quickly in the 1930s. Vaughan Williams was disgusted and saddened by events in Europe which seemed to point toward another cataclysmic world war. His response was to create a large work for chorus, orchestra, and soloists — Dona Nobis Pacem (Latin for “grant us peace”) — which still speaks to us in 2016 as Vaughan Williams must have intended it: not a prayer only, but also a warning and even a bitter lament for a certain war ahead.
1936 and 2016

The 20th century was the bloodiest in human history: civil wars, religious wars, and two World Wars resulted in more than 160 million deaths. Since World War II there have been an estimated 125 wars. In 2016, there are ongoing wars in Nigeria, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Turkey, Somalia, Darfur, Sudan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Ukraine. In 1936, most people could still remember the devastation of the “Great War” (which would soon be known as World War I), and they watched anxiously as civil war broke out in Spain, Mussolini’s fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, and Hitler denounced the Treaty of Versailles and ordered the reoccupation of the Rhineland. The rise of Nazism and Germany’s aggressive militarism signaled a looming conflict on the horizon.

Vaughan Williams and War

In 1936, Vaughan Williams was 64 years old, and he remembered keenly the horrors of war. In January 1915, when the first German air raid bombed England, he had enlisted immediately hoping to be sent to the front. He was instead assigned to stretcher carrying and later ambulance duties, transporting the wounded from the battlefield under cover of night.

The war affected Vaughan Williams deeply: he lost many close friends including his wife’s brother Charles, and the promising young composer George Butterworth.

Vaughan Williams’s Plan

A musical work the size and depth of *Dona Nobis Pacem* places huge demands on the composer in terms of organization and coherence. Vaughan Williams chose his texts carefully, using verses from the Bible, poetry of Walt Whitman, a quote from a political speech, and the Roman Catholic Mass.

To keep it compelling and to underscore its drama, the composer employs strong contrasts: the full chorus versus the solo soprano or baritone, versus the orchestra (as much a part of the storytelling as the singers). The orchestra is a study in vivid contrasts — everything from the crushing power of brass, drums, and organ to the gauzy, almost transparent textures of shimmering strings and harp. Especially effective is the use of silence in key dramatic moments.

Although the piece is in six movements, the music never really stops — the transitions between each movement connect them and create a strong forward momentum, with the ending of one movement often “morphing” into the beginning of the next.
Motifs

One of the strongest ways Vaughan Williams creates a sense of unity and coherence is through motifs. In literature, a motif is a recurring idea, word, or structural device which unify the work and help underscore its main ideas or themes. In musical terms, a motif is a very small melodic or rhythmic idea — even as few as two or three notes — which reappear throughout the work, giving it a sense of organic wholeness.

*Dona Nobis Pacem* features both types of motifs:

1. The words “*dona nobis pacem*” (grant us peace) appear throughout the work, sung by both the soprano and the chorus. These are the words of the opening movement but they also are the very last words sung, bringing the work to a gentle close.

2. Drums are a strong motif in the text and music. Whitman’s poetry features drums in two ways: the loud drums of war, used by the military in battle for signals and for troop control, and also the muffled drums of a funeral procession. Vaughan Williams makes powerful use of drums in his orchestration — not just the traditional timpani and bass drum, but also the side drum and tenor drum, which imitate military drums.

3. The semitone (“half-step”) is the smallest interval — the distance between two adjacent keys on the piano. Vaughan Williams employs this interval in creative, subtle ways throughout the work, announcing it as a main motif in the opening French horn line:

![Semitone](image)

Walt Whitman and the Civil War

Vaughan Williams was a lifelong fan of American poet Walt Whitman who also lived through a major war. During the Civil War, Whitman visited the wounded in New York hospitals. His brother George was wounded in Fredericksburg. He went to him and got his first experience of a field hospital, with its crude and hasty surgery techniques. He described “a heap of feet, legs, arms, and human fragments, cut bloody, black and blue, swelled and sickening.” Whitman went from there to Washington. For the rest of the war, he dedicated much of his time as a volunteer nurse, comforting the wounded and dying, reading to them, dressing their wounds, and bringing them small gifts.

Whitman’s war-time experiences found their way into poems like *The Wound Dresser* and *Daybreak Gray and...*
Dim, and the collection Drum-Taps, from which Vaughan Williams selected several texts for Dona Nobis Pacem.

A Prayer (and Plea) for Peace

Vaughan Williams begins the work with an anguished cry, first by the soprano and then the entire chorus. The text comes from the ancient words of the Roman Catholic Mass:

I. Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.
(Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, grant us peace.)

The semitone motif makes its first appearance, giving the soprano’s prayer for peace an anxious, urgent quality:

Although much of the movement expresses a gentle, quiet longing for peace, it is often interrupted by violent outbursts from the orchestra or chorus, as if war was already at the doorstep. And sure enough — the soprano’s final plea for peace, sung over a silent orchestra, is eventually overshadowed by the approaching drums of war, plunging forward into the next movement with this motif:
The Ruthless Destruction of War

The quiet of the first movement is shattered by the onslaught of trumpets, horns, and drums, bursting onto the soundscape. For this movement, Vaughan Williams chose one of Whitman’s most famous poems, written in 1861 as the Civil War was wreaking destruction on all facets of American life. The poem itself imitates bugles and drums with its short, clipped phrases and its percussive alliteration. (Read it out loud for the full effect of its “whirr and pound.”)

II. Beat! Beat! Drums!

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.

The message: no one is safe from the destruction of war. Everyone and everything is swept up in its violence.

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 — no brokers or speculators — would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums — you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums! — blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley — stop for no expostulation,

Don’t stop for a parley (a peace negotiation). Don’t mind those who are crying, praying, or uncertain.

Mind not the timid — mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,

The repetition of “mind not” has the effect of marching — the war is relentless and unstoppable.

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,

The images of death at the end of the poem foreshadow the theme of the next movement.

So strong you thump O terrible drums — so loud you bugles blow.

Vaughan Williams maximizes the built-in fast tempo of the poem with music that rushes forward relentlessly — there is no relief from its loud, crushing violence.

The semitone motif appears immediately:
Then the composer combines the semitone and drum motif. This motif floods the texture, pressing into nearly every measure of the piece. Nothing and no one is unscathed by war — it is everywhere.

The bugle calls and drums melt, transformed into lapping waves of “Reconciliation.” Clamor is washed away.

**Washing the World**

In stark contrast to the previous movement, Vaughan Williams now sets one of Whitman’s most famous and enigmatic poems. The various meanings of the poem have been long discussed and debated, but at least one of its messages is “time heals all wounds.”

The “word” over all is “reconciliation.” But what is being reconciled? At first it seems that man’s carnage — the unnatural acts of war and destruction — are being cleansed and healed by natural forces (death, night, time). Death and Night are sisters in the poem: Death provides a final rest for soldiers, and night is a “small death” which brings healing and rest of its own. The work of the sisters is slow and persistent, as their hands patiently wash “this soiled world” of its death and brokenness.

The poem takes a turn in its last three lines, using first-person language to describe a very personal scene. A soldier gazes on his enemy, dead and lying in a coffin and realizes that they are the same — both carry the divine within them. In a second kind of reconciliation, he places a gentle kiss of forgiveness and reconciliation on his enemy’s cheek.

**Additional Reading**

In Wilfred Owen’s poem, *Strange Meeting*, two soldiers, enemies in battle, meet in the afterlife.
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 soiled 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.

Vaughan Williams makes real the tenderness and intimacy of the poem by using the baritone soloist, like a solitary soldier reflecting on the scene, followed by the communal expression of the text by the full chorus. The piece ends with another statement of “Dona nobis pacem” by the soprano, sung over a silent orchestra. But the drums of war are heard again in the distance ...

War Is About Real People

The longest movement is also the emotional heart of Dona Nobis Pacem. This is another “drum piece,” but here the drums are the sad and muffled cadences of a stately funeral procession, as two fallen soldiers are carried to a double grave. Whitman’s poem is filled with specific and detailed imagery, making the loss of war real and suddenly personal.

IV. Dirge for Two Veterans

The last sunbeam
Lightly falls from the finished 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-keyed 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.

Moonlight — usually associated with romance, but here very different. Whitman is a master of poetic details, helping us see, hear, and feel the scene in its specificity.

The moon is typically associated with the feminine. Could this possibly be, in a cosmic way, the woman grieving most profoundly in the scene: the mother, who watches her husband and son being brought to burial?

The bugles and war drums (“Beat! Beat! Drums!”) flood the soundscape. They’re not deafening — not like in battle. Why are they described as so loud and “convulsive”? Is their “pounding” and “whirring” more symbolic than actual — more a reflection of his emotions, than of actual sound?
For the son is brought with the father,  
In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,  
Two veterans, son and father, dropped 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.

The tragedy of the scene is revealed: it is not one dead soldier, but two — father and son, killed in battle together. The poet symbolizes how war destroys not just one generation, but each successive generation.

Vaughan Williams recreates an amazing atmosphere, heard in the second strophe. Harp and strings shimmer like soft moonlight. Voices sing with a polyphonic texture, every part independently, as if each had the melody. Not singing the same words at the same time creates a blurred and hazy effect, like dusk.

This movement (and poem) ends very much like the preceding one: with a deep, almost spiritual compassion for the soldier. The funeral procession disappears into the night, but once again, its final sounds — a distant drumbeat — become the introduction to the next movement.
Complete Annihilation

On February 23, 1855, British orator and Quaker John Bright delivered an impassioned speech to the House of Commons, lamenting Britain’s war against Russia in the Crimea. Although it employed the most modern technologies such as telegraph and railroad, its “notoriously incompetent butchery” left 600,000 dead at war’s end.

Vaughan Williams uses an excerpt from Bright’s “Angel of Death Speech” to convey the lack of protection or comfort in the midst of utter carnage. It uses Passover imagery from the Book of Exodus — blood above the door protected the Hebrews from the Angel of Death. Now there is no protection. After “Dona nobis pacem,” the chorus sings bleak and foreboding texts from the prophet Jeremiah. It alludes to the brutal armies above Dan, Israel’s northern border (referencing Germany’s unlawful 1930s military expansions). Israel most feared foreign cavalries with horses and chariots.

V. The Angel of Death

*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.*

*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 8:15-22)

This entire section is a canon — the men’s voices following the women’s two beats behind. A canon is one of the strictest, most unforgiving kinds of music to write ("canon" means "rule"). Here it conveys a sense of being trapped. The second voice has no independence but is doomed to follow the first. This is bleak — relentless and unrelieved misery. That is, until ...
A New Earth

If the “Dirge for Two Veterans” is the emotional heart of Dona Nobis Pacem, this musical moment might be the hinge upon which the entire work shifts in tone. The baritone solo sings new words of encouragement — like an angel or prophet — and suddenly everything is different. Vaughan Williams assembled a collage of Biblical texts both from the ancient prophets and the angels’s song from Luke, and the chorus now proclaims a new world order, where the nations come together in peace. The music is ebullient — filled with pealing bells and joyful dancing rhythms. It is a hopeful, jubilant vision, but it does not last — the orchestra disappears in the last 19 measures of the piece and it is voices alone, and finally the lone soprano who sings, as at the beginning: grant us peace.

VI. O Man greatly beloved

O man greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong. (Daniel 10:19)

The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former ... and in this place will I give peace. (Haggai 2:9)

Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Micah 3:4)

And none shall make them afraid, neither shall the sword go through their land. (Leviticus 26:6)

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. (Psalm 85:10-11)

Open to me the gates of righteousness, I will go into them. (Psalm 118:19)

Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled; and let them hear and say, it is the truth. (Isaiah 43:9)

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. (Isaiah 66:18-22)

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men. (Luke 2:14)

_Dona nobis pacem._

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**Vaughan Williams and Christianity**

He used many Biblical texts and assembled them expertly, so it is easy to assume Vaughan Williams was Christian. He had a profound respect for Christianity, the Church of England and its music, but was an atheist in college. His wife and biographer, Ursula Vaughan Williams later described him as a "cheerful agnostic."
About Our Soloists

Bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen has performed with the world’s leading opera companies and orchestras and been praised for his vibrant and handsome stage presence and distinctive vocal style. At the Metropolitan Opera of New York, he has appeared as Escamillo in Carmen, a signature role he has also performed at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Bavarian State Opera, and Barcelona’s Gran Teatre del Liceu. He has appeared as Don Fernando in Beethoven’s Fidelio at Houston Grand Opera, as Leporello in Don Giovanni at the Teatro Real in Madrid, and in the title role of The Marriage of Figaro at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence. He made his Carnegie Hall debut singing Haydn’s Creation and sang Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under the direction of Esa-Pekka Salonen. In 2016, he will appear in Handel’s Orlando with the English Concert in Vienna, Birmingham, London, Amsterdam, and Carnegie Hall in New York. Originally from Clinton, Iowa, Kyle now lives in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife Rebecca and two children.

Soprano Alison Wahl is originally from Rochester, New York and currently lives in Chicago. She has been praised by The Chicago Tribune for her “bright, vibrant soprano” and is active performing in both opera and concert appearances. She has been a soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chamber Music Festival and the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra, and also performs with the Chicago Symphony Chorus, the Grant Park Symphony Chorus, and Music of the Baroque. Currently, she sings the role of Pamina in Mozart’s Magic Flute, touring with Opera for the Young. Alison graduated summa cum laude from Amherst College. She holds a Masters of Music degree from Northwestern University where she is a doctoral candidate, studying with Pamela Hinchman and Richard Boldrey. Alison is also an accomplished songwriter, with two albums released.

Online Resources

Drum Taps, poetry collection by Walt Whitman (full texts):
whitmanarchive.org/published/other/DrumTaps.html

Ralph Vaughan Williams Biography: rvwsociety.com/bio_expanded.html

Whitman’s Drum Taps and Washington’s Civil War Hospitals (article):
xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/hospital/whitman.htm
Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe an anti-war work of art, like *Dona Nobis Pacem*, can contribute to world peace? If so, how? If not, what do you believe is its purpose?

2. Do you interpret Walt Whitman’s Civil War poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” as pro-war or anti-war?

3. How do you interpret the unusual ending of the piece, with the hushed chorus voices and solo soprano? What message(s) do you believe Vaughan Williams intended to convey?

Ralph Vaughan Williams and *Dona Nobis Pacem* Timeline

- 1872  Vaughan Williams born in Down Ampney, UK.
- 1890-4  Vaughan Williams pursues musical studies at the Royal College of Music and Trinity College, Cambridge.
- 1903  Vaughan Williams begins collecting and cataloguing English folk songs, and working with the texts of American poet Walt Whitman.
- 1914  WWI breaks out in Europe.
- 1915  Vaughan Williams enlists in the Royal Army Medical Corps, serving in a field ambulance unit.
- 1936  *Dona Nobis Pacem* premieres.
- 1939  World War II breaks out in Europe.
- 1958  After a long and extremely prolific career, Vaughan Williams dies at 85.
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“The Third of May 1808 (Execution of the Defenders of Madrid),” Francisco Goya, 1814