

# Memories of Britten's 'War Requiem'

'My subject is War and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity....all a poet can ever do today is warn.' Wilfred Owen

These words, written as draft notes for the preface of a collection of war poems Owen hoped to publish in 1919, appear on the title page of the score of Benjamin Britten's 'War Requiem'. Tragically, he was killed on November 4 1918 whilst attempting to lead his men across the Sambre Canal at Ors in France. He was just 25 years of age.

On November 14, to commemorate the centenary of World War One, Britten's poignant setting of words from Owen's poems, integrated with the more traditional words of the Latin Requiem Mass, will resound once again around the majestic spaces of our Cathedral.

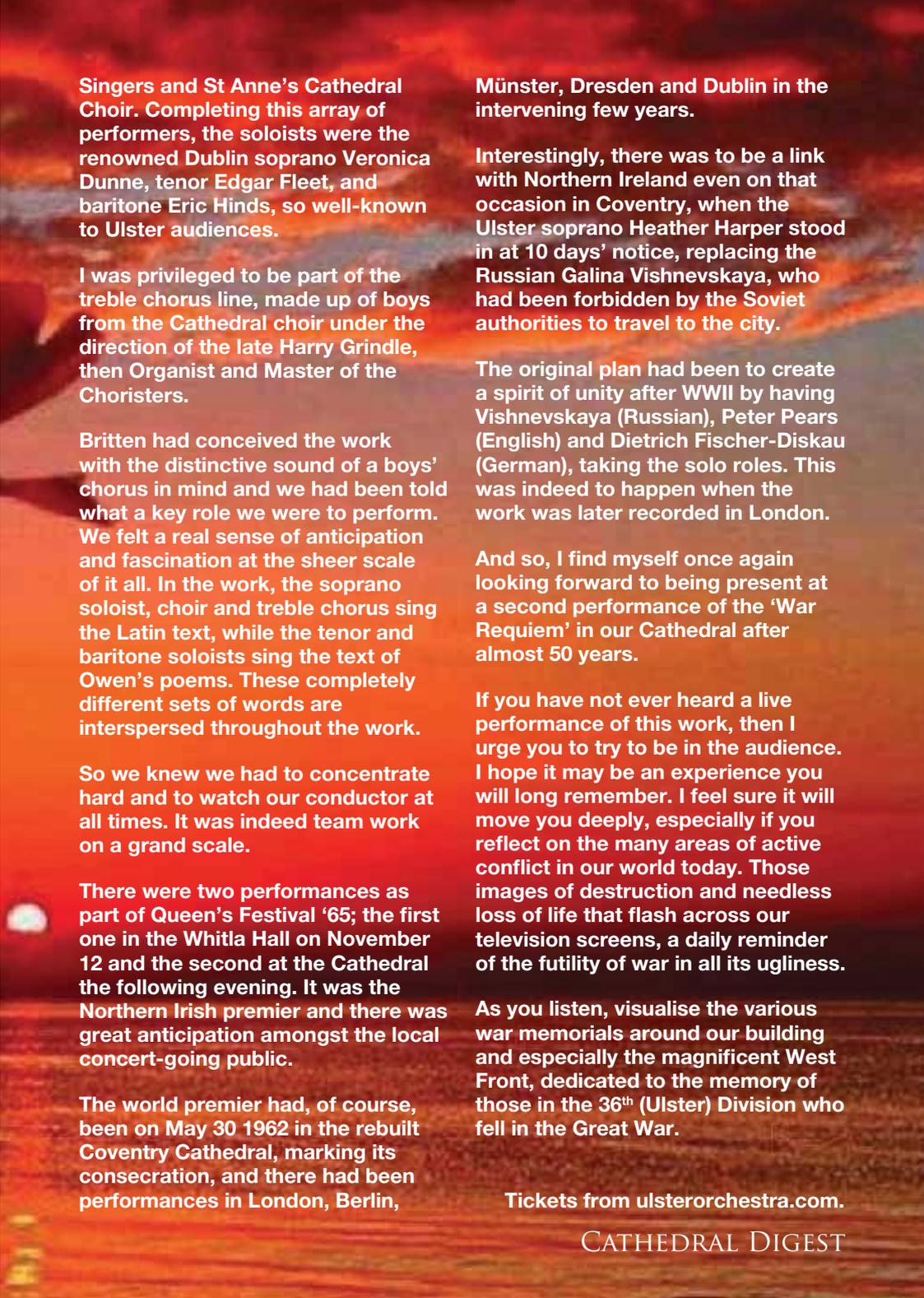
It will be performed by the Ulster Orchestra and the RTE Concert Orchestra. The soprano, tenor and baritone soloists will be supported by the Belfast Philharmonic and Leeds Philharmonic Choirs, along with St Anne's Girls' Choir. A perfect setting for such an iconic masterpiece of our time and more relevant than ever in our unsettled world.

There are only a handful of our parishioners who, like me will recall another such performance of this magnificent and powerful work in the Cathedral, almost 49 years to the day, in 1965.

If my memory serves me correctly, the considerable forces consisted of the Studio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the late Havelock Nelson, and the Olin Chamber Orchestra conducted by the late Terence Lovett. The choir comprised the Ulster Singers, the McCready



By Alan Boyd



Singers and St Anne's Cathedral Choir. Completing this array of performers, the soloists were the renowned Dublin soprano Veronica Dunne, tenor Edgar Fleet, and baritone Eric Hinds, so well-known to Ulster audiences.

I was privileged to be part of the treble chorus line, made up of boys from the Cathedral choir under the direction of the late Harry Grindle, then Organist and Master of the Choristers.

Britten had conceived the work with the distinctive sound of a boys' chorus in mind and we had been told what a key role we were to perform. We felt a real sense of anticipation and fascination at the sheer scale of it all. In the work, the soprano soloist, choir and treble chorus sing the Latin text, while the tenor and baritone soloists sing the text of Owen's poems. These completely different sets of words are interspersed throughout the work.

So we knew we had to concentrate hard and to watch our conductor at all times. It was indeed team work on a grand scale.

There were two performances as part of Queen's Festival '65; the first one in the Whitla Hall on November 12 and the second at the Cathedral the following evening. It was the Northern Irish premier and there was great anticipation amongst the local concert-going public.

The world premier had, of course, been on May 30 1962 in the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, marking its consecration, and there had been performances in London, Berlin,

Münster, Dresden and Dublin in the intervening few years.

Interestingly, there was to be a link with Northern Ireland even on that occasion in Coventry, when the Ulster soprano Heather Harper stood in at 10 days' notice, replacing the Russian Galina Vishnevskaya, who had been forbidden by the Soviet authorities to travel to the city.

The original plan had been to create a spirit of unity after WWII by having Vishnevskaya (Russian), Peter Pears (English) and Dietrich Fischer-Diskau (German), taking the solo roles. This was indeed to happen when the work was later recorded in London.

And so, I find myself once again looking forward to being present at a second performance of the 'War Requiem' in our Cathedral after almost 50 years.

If you have not ever heard a live performance of this work, then I urge you to try to be in the audience. I hope it may be an experience you will long remember. I feel sure it will move you deeply, especially if you reflect on the many areas of active conflict in our world today. Those images of destruction and needless loss of life that flash across our television screens, a daily reminder of the futility of war in all its ugliness.

As you listen, visualise the various war memorials around our building and especially the magnificent West Front, dedicated to the memory of those in the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division who fell in the Great War.

Tickets from [ulsterorchestra.com](http://ulsterorchestra.com).

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