

**Cleveland Orchestra to present Britten's *War Requiem*:
a conversation with soprano Tamara Wilson**

by Mike Telin



Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, first performed on 30 May 1962, was commissioned to mark the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, which was built after the original 14th-century structure was destroyed during a World War II bombing raid.

Britten, a pacifist and conscientious objector, chose to interleave the traditional Latin Mass for the Dead with poems by Wilfred Owen that were written during World War I.

On Thursday, April 23 at 7:30 pm in Mandel Concert Hall, Klaus Mäkelä will lead The Cleveland Orchestra, Chorus, Children's chorus, and soloists soprano Tamara Wilson, tenor Andrew Staples, and baritone Ludwig Mittelhammer in Britten's monumental work. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 7:30 pm and Sunday at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

We caught up with Tamara Wilson by phone.

Mike Telin: We're looking forward to having you back in town.

Tamara Wilson: I'm so excited to be with The Cleveland Orchestra again. They're so good at listening and nuance. It's such a special group.

MT: The War Requiem is a piece you know pretty well.

TW: The first time I did it was in Los Angeles with James Conlon, and it has become one of my favorite pieces to sing. Vocally, it's very moving.

MT: What about the piece brings out these emotional reactions?

TW: I grew up Catholic, so singing mass parts juxtaposed with a cyclical thing that has been happening since men decided to pick up a rock and kill each other is always close to home. Things haven't changed much, so although the Britten was written in the '60s, it still feels as relevant as ever.

MT: What is it about Wilfred Owen's poetry that's so compelling?

TW: There's a Wilfred Owen quote that says "Pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism." When you are a pacifist, you see the futility of war, and using religion or certain morals or loyalties to justify violence.

The poems that Britten sets feel so intimate — it's something we shouldn't be hearing, but we have to hear. And he puts his ideas together so eloquently that you have this immediate emotional impact because he's going through something so terrible, both as a witness and as a participant.

It's interesting because if you're comparing the Britten to other requiems it still follows the form. Musically speaking, it's still a requiem, but in the Dies Irae, it literally sounds like war. In most Requiem's there are depictions of judgement and hell. But in the Britten, there are literally bugle charges and distant booms.

MT: The piece calls for an enormous number of performers. What's it like to stand in the middle of everything.

TW: When I did it in Argentina I was standing to one side within the orchestra. When I did it at the Staatstheater Darmstadt last year, I was also located to the side because my singing is with the chorus. So it's interesting to be halfway between the chorus and the children's chorus. It is so fun to be next to all of the percussion and the brass. Like Mahler Eight, when you're surrounded by that amount of sound it goes straight into your body, and there's no other high that can replicate it. You feel the vibrations through all of your veins.

The good thing about this piece is that it's written very lyrically for soprano. There are parts that are very pianissimo — they're delicate and ethereal — then you have the huge parts that are pure power, which is always thrilling. I like to showcase big dynamic swings. You don't want to stay in the same place all the time, that's vanilla.

MT: Have you worked with Klaus Mäkelä before?

TW: No, but this summer we're doing *Die Frau ohne Schatten* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, so it'll be nice to have a mini preview.

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