Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936)

The cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem* "Give us peace" was a work borne out of grief and frustration at the magnitude of human loss that came as the result of World War I and the deep existential dread that history was about to repeat itself. And, of course, it did. Vaughan Williams had understood the horrors of war firsthand. In 1914, although he was old enough to have been granted exemption and already leading a comfortable life as one of Britain's rising composers, he chose to enlist as a medical orderly with the Royal Army Medical Corps. It was a treacherous line of service, as his duties included evacuating and tending to the wounded, often in the direct line of fire. It took its toll on Vaughan Williams personally. He wrote to the composer Gustav Holst in 1916 that "I sometimes dread coming back to normal life with so many gaps...out of those 7 who joined up together in August 1914 only 3 are left - I sometimes think now that it is wrong to have made friends with people younger than oneself." Nonetheless, he continued his service. In 1917, he became a lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery and was involved in active combat in France. His exposure to heavy artillery caused hearing loss that worsened throughout his life.

After WWI, Vaughan Williams was initially slow to return to composition, but his reputation continued to grow as one of Britain's preeminent composers throughout the 1920s and 30s. As political storms again gathered in Europe, Vaughan Williams was commissioned by the Huddersfield Choral Society to commemorate their centennial as an institution in 1936. Rather than providing a celebratory work, he offered *Dona Nobis Pacem* as a cautionary warning against another global war. For the texts of his composition, Vaughan Williams drew from the secular poetry of Walt Whitman, whose works he had long admired, as well as portions of the *Agnus Dei*, a prayer for peace from the Mass Ordinary: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace." Those last three words, "*Dona Nobis Pacem*" resonate throughout the work. The work is performed in six continuous movements without a break.

I. Agnus Dei
Within the first few measures, Vaughan Williams foreshadows the structural conflict and drama of this expansive work, which juxtaposed individual and collective cries for peace. It opens with the soprano soloist singing softly, plaintively the last line of the *Agnus Dei*: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, give us peace." What we hear initially as a plea for pity, however, is soon interrupted as the full orchestra and chorus crashes in, sounding more like a commandment than an appeal for grace.

II. Beat! Beat! Drums!
In the second movement, Vaughan Williams plunges us into the sounds of war itself, providing a vivid musical depiction of Whitman's poem. We hear bugle calls from the brass and percussive rhythms that could doubly signify gunfire or the military strikes of a snare drum. Each stanza of

Whitman's poem begins with the line "Beat! beat! drums! —blow! bugles! blow!" War shows no prejudice in wreaking havoc on every facet of life.

III. Reconciliation

In the third movement, opening with a baritone soloist, Whitman's text asks us to confront the individual humanity of the enemy. Is he so unlike us? The last lines conjure a solemn final recognition and reconciliation: "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." At the end of the movement, the solo soprano interjects once again with the plea for peace. The solo voice wafts and lingers for a moment before we hear a funereal drum leading us forward and back down to earth.

IV. Dirge for Two Veterans

Movement four contemplates the toll of war on families. As the funeral march unfolds, we understand that the dirge is for a father and a son, two veterans buried together: "A double grave awaits them."

V. "The Angel of Death has been abroad…"

The baritone soloist returns in the beginning of movement five. His sings a text taken from a famous speech by John Bright, a Quaker pacifist: "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." The *Dona nobis pacem* returns in its loudest and most furious statement yet: "GIVE US, GIVE US…" the choir implores and the soprano soloist, rather than the plaintive cry of the beginning, cries out, too, in frustration. The drama then subsides into a chorale of quiet resignation from the Book of Jeremiah: "We looked for peace but no good came… Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

VI. "Oh man, greatly beloved"

But then there's a glimmer of hope, as the baritone soloist opens movement six with the text, "Oh man, greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee, be strong…" He sings of a day of peace when the nation will be stronger than it was before. The ending offers a utopian possibility. We hear the triumphant text, "For as the new heavens, and the new earth…" imagining a better world to come, and the pealing of bells, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men." After this climatic moment, the *Dona Nobis Pacem* returns, the movement ending quietly with one last exhortation for peace.