

Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War

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TRANSCRIPT

Music written in response to war: from Bach to Shostakovich – Stephen Johnson

STEPHEN JOHNSON: I have a story to tell about which there is far too much to say, as I realised the moment I began to write down my thoughts about it, but I think that maybe just in sketching the outlines of this story, it may raise some issues, which you might want to ponder about later, and also it will give us a chance to hear some fairly remarkable music as well. What struck me when I began to think about it was the way that since the Renaissance in particular, Western classical music has begun to register a kind of response to war, which it's difficult to parallel in other forms. You may have some suggestions, in which case, I am very ready to hear them. But music has been involved in war and in warfare probably for as far back as we can record and beyond, hasn't it? It's very much been about the march, if you think about it, with its four square rhythms, about instilling that sense of corporate identity, about the movement of the feet, about, you know, making you part of a corps, setting your resolution in process, thinking like an organism, a collective organism, rather than an individual, and very much used as part of rhythm, very much used as part of parade ground activity, with the Sergeant Major drawing on it in order to absolutely knock out that sense of freedom of thought, of individuality, of potential rebellion and instill a responsiveness, a collective responsiveness to orders.

Music has been very much involved in celebrating victory, and music has been very much involved also through religious rite in lamenting, in masses for the dead, and other forms of expressions of collective grief. But what interests me is how I said, since the Renaissance, art music, classical music, has begun to register a different kind of response. It's a story that seems to have grown throughout the years. One of the first examples of a published Western classical work or collection of works where war is clearly indicated as a subject matter is Monteverdi's *Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi*, his madrigals, warlike and amorous madrigals they are described as. It is music in which musical depiction is very much a part of the sound world but what is interesting here is that war doesn't seem to be depicted as actual war, but much more as an allegory, an allegory of love, the hunt for love, the battle for love, the conquering of the desired object, feminists might want to take that one and run with it a little bit later! You are welcome. But as the Baroque era develops from Monteverdi, we begin to find depictions of war actually as war, not so much picture postcard images of war, picturesque images of war, entertainment ideas of war, but we begin to get some kind of a suggestion of the impact of war in a wider sense.

One very interesting early example of this is to be found in the works of a highly interesting and somewhat eccentric German composer called Heinrich Biber, no relation to the contemporary Bieber, with a collection of a little extraordinary suite for ten solo strings called *Battalia*, 'battle', which he wrote in 1670. The date is highly

significant. This is only slightly more than 20 years after the end of the Thirty Years' War. This was a devastating war, the dates are 1618 to 1648, and it was exactly 30 years. Some estimations of the effect of that war - well, I remember reading that the population of the German speaking territories before the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War was around 12 million; by the end of it, it was around 4 million. Now, war in the Middle Ages particularly was often a highly localised phenomenon. Battles were quite small scale compared to what we know now. Italian battles were often conducted according to quite extraordinary courtly rules, whereby the actual amount of violent engagement was rather small. But this war was devastating in its impact, and indeed, its consequences. The trauma of that impact, continued to resonate with Germans until the 20th century. This was the war in which basically, after the Reformation, Catholic and Protestant forces struggled for supremacy and then the major world powers got involved and there was devastation, as I said, on a massive scale.

Another interesting phenomenon about the Thirty Years' War was this was the first war in which, as far as we know, mercenaries played an important part; the paid freelance soldier with no particular allegiance to a cause here or there. And Biber's *Battalia*, as a very entertaining depiction of the battle, with imitations of side drums and even flying arrows, Biber asks the violinist at one point - this is the first recorded use of this effect - to turn their bows round and hit their strings with the back of the bows, so you get the sound of flying arrows. So it's all rather fun. Even the lament for the wounded at the end is a bit more pictorial than actually an expression of shock and grief. But there is a section in which we hear the mercenaries singing songs in the camp. And this is quite extraordinary because there is a suggestion of real, some terrible chaotic subversive element beginning to creep into the art of war. Basically, Biber has all the ten soloists, ten string players, play folk songs, the kind of songs we imagine that the mercenaries would sing and you can probably imagine the words wouldn't be very repeatable either. He puts them together. Remember, this is early Baroque; this is the 17th century, not Charles Ives.

[Music plays.]

Isn't that extraordinary? That's the camp of mercenaries, the new freelance disorderly rabble element beginning to creep into warfare, registered by Heinrich Biber.

Another important step forward in music, registering the impact of war in new ways, can be found in the music of Joseph Haydn. Some of you will know that one of his 104 symphonies, number 100, is called the Military, and appeared in 1794. I have a review of the first performance, here in London:

"Another new Symphony, by Haydn, was performed for the second time; the middle movement was again received with absolute shouts of applause. Encore! Encore! Resounded from every seat; the ladies themselves could not forbear. It is the advancing to battle, the march of men, the sounding of the charge, the thundering of the onset, the clash of arms, the groans of the wounded, and what may well be called the hellish roar of war all increase to a climax of horrid sublimity! Which if other can conceive, Haydn alone can execute; at least he alone hitherto has affected these wonders."

The passage the reviewer seems to be thinking of particularly is at the end of the second movement, where at last really recognisable sounds of military activity, military music, but even for a moment Haydn, it may sound rather tame to our ears but this is an example of music registering something of the shock of war, the dissonance that follows the trumpet fanfare we hear at the beginning. This is Haydn's *Military Symphony*, second movement.

[Music plays.]

But just for a moment, that timpani, the trumpets and then that moment of dissonance just from the orchestra, that would have been quite disturbing to an audience from Haydn's time and that in itself is nothing compared to what he achieved a little later, four years later, in what is sometimes known as the Nelson Mass but Haydn entitled it the *Missa in Angustiis*, the mass in time of fear, very close to the German word 'angst' there, a word which I am sure many of us will recognise, which was composed as the Napoleonic Wars that followed the French Revolution were beginning to send tsunamis of fear all the way across Europe. The opening movement of the Nelson Mass, Kyrie, Lord have mercy, has an almost operatic depiction of the fear, terror and confusion, the four soloists register the shock in the most extraordinary dramatic, operatic, theatrical way. The Haydn scholar H. C. Robbins Landon says that the listener hears, "for perhaps the first time in music history, the presence of real fear, nay terror".

Then later in the Mass, towards the end, comes the movement called the Benedictus, the words are "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". We can't be absolutely sure of this at this point but it seems that at the time Haydn was composing this movement, he had the news – which would have taken a long time to travel to Vienna from the Mediterranean Sea – that Nelson had defeated Napoleon's fleet at the Battle of the Nile. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". Is Haydn actually here thinking specifically of Nelson, the liberator, from this terrible Godless threat of Napoleon? There is an extraordinary moment when the already quite agitated choral expression in this movement, it is quite unusual for a Benedictus, which is normally a serene movement, to have such a high level of anxiety in it. Suddenly, it is almost invaded by the stark sounds of fanfares, of trumpets and drums. It's almost as though at this point we are beginning to sense that music can register something of the scar tissue of the conflict of music.

[Music plays.]

And back to more conventional expressions of rejoicing at the end but it takes the music a little longer to recover from the shock of that massive trumpet onslaught in the middle of the Mass there. And this clearly left a mark on Haydn's pupil, and admirer, Beethoven. Beethoven's last great choral work, the *Missa Solemnis*, the solemn mass, which he spent at least three years composing between 1819 and 1822 was begun four years after the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, and the Congress of Vienna re-established or thought that it had re-established old style conservative monarchic rule all over Central Europe. But in the last movement of the *Missa Solemnis*, the Agnus Dei, lamb of God, the last words of the mass are "lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world, grant us peace" and here comes an extraordinarily vivid moment, dramatic moment, when those trumpets and drums we

have already heard in Haydn invade the music with a completely new vividness, it's a section that is sometimes referred to as the invasion section. You have to remember that this was music that was composed to be performed in a cathedral at the enthronement of an archbishop, so it is a solemn mass, which in those days meant very solemn and ritualised indeed. In the middle of this prayer for peace that had been repeated over and over again since the early days of the Catholic church, suddenly there is an absolutely onslaught of trumpets and drums and Beethoven very carefully puts them in the wrong key, the key of B flat, and the mass is in D, so there is an effect of quite shocking intrusion from another world. Remember also that Beethoven had experienced armed conflict at first hand during the bombardment of Vienna in 1808. The story is he had tried to cover his head with his pillows to preserve what was left of his hearing from the sound of the shelling that was going on in the city at the time. That kind of vividness, and then the intensity of the prayers that follow, "dona nobis", grant us peace, it can still create a bit of a frisson even today.

[Music plays.]

What's even more remarkable is the way that – I wish I could demonstrate this – but at the end of the mass, which is an ending that has confused a lot of people, many people hearing it for the first time are surprised it is not more emphatic, it seems curiously to end before its time or even to sound a little open-ended, Beethoven continues to - well, I will demonstrate on the piano. The mass, as I said, is in D major. [Plays chord.] But that invasion sequence was in the key of B flat. [Plays chord.] Which means that in those days, because Beethoven's timpani - they didn't have those wonderful things you can do now, you had to spend ages adjusting the screws on the side, to music you had got the tuning right. So the timpani would still have been stuck to B flat and F, even though we are in D, which means at the end, when everybody joins in the great cries for liberation and praise, the timpani can't join in, and you hear them in the background, just before the end, still, very distantly, this little dissonance, the dissonance that won't resolve and around the same time, Beethoven wrote a fascinating letter to a friend of his about an opera he was thinking of composing. He hasn't got a subject or story for this opera but he says: perhaps the dissonances throughout the whole opera might not be quite resolved or else resolved in some totally different manner, for civilised music cannot be conceived in such weird and desolate times. There we have it, at the end of the *Missa Solemnis*, the dissonance that won't resolve, the question mark that is still - yes, the prayer for peace appears to have been temporarily successful but the dissonance won't go away, it hasn't been resolved.

Now, it's a while, I think, before we get anybody taking on the whole issue of this question of the loving God, reconciling the loving God with war, with the whole idea of human suffering on cosmic scales. Later in the 19th century, you get composers cheering on the victorious armies, as Beethoven himself had done in 1815, when he wrote a cantata called *Der glorreiche Augenblick*, the glorious moment, which is probably one of the least glorious things he ever wrote, it's a dreadful piece, it really is. A lot better is Tchaikovsky's *1812* overture from 1880 which has the cannon shots at the end famously, or Wagner's *Kaisermarsch* which he wrote in 1871 after Prussia had won the Franco-Prussian war and effectively at the same time achieved the longed for unification of Germany. It seems that even Wagner regretted having taken such a flag waving part in this, indeed it's not one of his greatest achievements by a very long way.

When we turn to World War I and the English experience, it is curious how little there is of, say, tub-thumping once the armed conflict began, from Elgar. His own cantata *For The Fallen*, for instance, has a strange almost ambiguous quality about it, and we find in Elgar's last works, towards the end of the First World War, a curious retreat into dissolution and elegy, which was perhaps a note heard by the English composer Frank Bridge. If you don't know Frank Bridge's cello concerto *Oration* that he wrote in 1822, I recommend you to hear it, it's an incredibly powerful antiwar piece, it sounds in places closer to Shostakovich than to any other English composer in the 1920s. There are all sorts of other ways in which we see in English music around the same time the impact of war, although one thing I often like to think about, that often amazes me, is that Holst's famous Mars from *The Planets*, which surely, if any piece depicts the horrors of 20th century industrial mechanised warfare has to be that, was written in 1914, before a shot had been fired in conflict, and a year before tanks were used in the Army. The idea of warfare still prevailing in Holst's day, although there had been improvements in artillery, was an old-fashioned one. Holst is to some extent working on intuition, as to what he feels the shape of things to come, as his friend H. G. Wells put it, might be.

Also another point that is worth remembering, as we turn now to Vaughan Williams, the next time you hear Vaughan Williams' *Lark Ascending*, which seems to be pretty unassailably near the top of the Classic FM charts all the time, remember that that too was written in 1914, on the very eve of World War I, at the same time as Vaughan Williams' closest friend, Holst, was composing Mars, and they shared their views on war very strongly, and indeed on socialism, and that that piece itself has an astonishingly elegiac quality in relation to what was about to come, but I think the work of Vaughan Williams' that most fascinates me of all in relation to the way that his music registers war is perhaps his least understood symphony, the *Pastoral Symphony*, composed between 1916, when Vaughan Williams was at the trenches, and 1921. In fact he sketched the symphony right at the front, while he was out in France with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Very typical of Vaughan Williams, although he was of a certain - I wouldn't say pacifist leaning, he nevertheless felt that he couldn't actually kill, so he joined as a medical orderly, and a stretcher bearer, saw many of the horrors of the trenches at first hand. The *Pastoral Symphony*, when you hear it for the first time, you might think that war is the last thing on the mind of this composer. The tone is prevalingly subdued, contemplative, some of Vaughan Williams' most gorgeous velvety scoring going on, there's no real fast movement in the entire piece, it's not exactly militaristic yet it is striking how, throughout the work, despite that velvety scoring and mostly calm surface, how Vaughan Williams uses dissonance. Like so many survivors of the trenches in World War I he never said anything directly about the horrors he would have witnessed but he did tell Ursula, his wife in later years, this in 1913 about the pastoral symphony:

"It's not really lambkins frisking at all, as most people take for granted ... It's really wartime music - a great deal of it was incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance wagon at Écoivres. And we went up a steep hill and here was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset."

So here we have an extraordinary extreme of contrast, the beauty of that pastoral sunset and the horror of what was around and Vaughan Williams deftly avoids

mentioning that, even in his letter to Ursula, and yet there is something about the way that the *Pastoral Symphony* hints at but leaves unsaid things which is absolutely remarkable. And this is particularly captured in the slow movement, the second movement of the symphony. Immediately, when you hear this music, images of nocturnal paintings by Samuel Palmer, those wonderful English nocturnal landscapes come to mind. But there is an extraordinary passage at the heart of this movement. There is a long solo for trumpet which Vaughan Williams directs should be played only using the natural harmonics. In other words, forget the valves which fill in the gaps in the harmonic series, you can only use the natural notes that come as you play with the lips, which means that some of the notes sounds slightly flat or sharp to modern ears. Vaughan Williams revealed that there was a specific memory associated with this passage, of a young soldier on Salisbury Plain, just before all the troops were sent out to France, practising. He was trying to play the Last Post on a bugle but he kept missing the top note. And suddenly we hear this extraordinary passage for the trumpet, you can hear exactly this happening, and then when he finally, the trumpet reaches at long last that top note there comes an extraordinary dissonant outburst, actually loud music is as rare as fast music in Vaughan Williams' third symphony, yet you feel just for a moment that you are aware of what is buried beneath this calm beautiful surface.

[Music plays.]

Despite the sumptuousness of the scoring of that last passage, the dissonances in it are excruciating. We stopped at that last one there, if I were to bash it out on the piano, you would go ouch! That is the wonderful paradox he achieved in this symphony, he scores it so beautifully, it's like someone talking in a very tender voice, but what's coming out underneath it is acutely painful. That is in itself such an extraordinary and subtle expression of a state of mind, you can almost imagine, you think that that bugler, his chances of survival were pretty small, think of his ghost in the sound of that trumpet, sounding through the conventional Vaughan Williams pastoral landscape in that slow movement. It reminds me that when we first moved to Herefordshire, you wouldn't have thought that in a place like Herefordshire there would be much of the impact of war, yet we went to a tiny village called Stretton Grandison, which as a friend of mine said it takes longer to write down than it does to drive through, and there was a church that belonged to the manor, the Hopton Hall, I remember thinking, I wonder what happened to the Hoptons, and going to the church and seeing the three plaques for the three sons, 1915, 1916, 1917, oh yes. And then going up to the tiny village of Ashburton up the road and seeing the war memorial, listing the number of young men on that, and thinking, today, this would be devastating, what it must have meant in Edwardian England to lose that number of young men. You don't hear a shell fired, you don't hear any impact, but you sense the incredible loss, and that I think Vaughan Williams conveys extraordinarily in the *Pastoral Symphony*.

A composer who registers, as we are about to hear, loss and shock with a very different kind of power, is the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Many of you will know that his *Leningrad* symphony, his 7th symphony, at least two movements of it were written while Shostakovich was still in the city of Leningrad which was cut off by the invading German armies for two and a half years. In the first year of the siege, in 1941, 1 million people died, either of malnutrition or of extreme cold because as it

would happen this was also the coldest winter in Leningrad for 100 years, the temperature was minus 45 for several days, German soldiers outside the city froze to death standing up, people in the city found eventually that it was no warmer in the houses than it was outside so they stood together in the street, huddled together, to listen to Radio Leningrad played on speakers in the street. Shostakovich's *Leningrad* symphony was eventually performed in the still besieged city, quite an achievement. I saw the manuscript of it recently and the first movement, there are these little circular symbols at more or less regular points throughout the movement and I asked the curator, what are those, and he said that Shostakovich's mother had written these on the score whenever there was an air raid and they had to run for cover, so he had actually indicated in the score where these air raids took place. I met an extraordinary old man by the name of Victor Koslov who had played clarinet in that siege performance, he was a clarinetist with the Red Army band and the Sergeant Major called him and said "Koslov, get your clarinet, you're going to be dropped into Leningrad to play a symphony", which surprised him. When he got there, he found that half the orchestra had died of malnutrition, most of them were too weak to play or particularly blow for more than ten minutes at a time so they had to have special diets flown in and to take aerobic exercise to get them up to the point of doing this. I remember talking to him and his wife, also there in the city at the time, at the end of the interview, I asked one of those slightly pat questions, I said: "when you hear this music today, does it still have the same effect on you?" And I remember him - well, I remember a wave of emotion hitting the room and both he and his wife started sobbing. He seized my arm and said, in Russian, "It's not possible to say, it's not possible to say". Well, it's certainly a powerful testimony to how music - it would seem, under the circumstances - played an astonishing part in not just registering the shock of the impact of conflict but in helping people to find the strength to survive and overcome it. It is extraordinary.

People argue these days about whether Shostakovich was thinking of Hitler or Stalin as the chief destroyer of Leningrad. I think that's a bit academic when you're in the midst of a situation where you're starving to death and being shelled all the time. The question of who is ultimately responsible is maybe not quite as important as the question of just surviving. That certainly seems to be a role that Shostakovich's 7th symphony played brilliantly in the course of the war. But it's quite interesting to compare what happened to the next symphony, the 8th. Shostakovich wrote this in 1943, not long after the end of the battle of Stalingrad and in fact people at the time thought it may have a connection. What's fascinating to me is that this symphony, which, it seems far more than the *Leningrad*, tries to express elements of destruction, shock, horror, brutalisation and grief, is one which could not, it seems, be heard in the mood of post-war trauma maybe or whatever, at the end of World War II. The symphony was denounced and Shostakovich along with it, he was called a bourgeois formalist, one of the worst you could be in those days, an enemy of the people. Here is the composer Vladimir Zakharov reacting to the symphony:

"I consider that from the point of view of the people, the Eighth Symphony can in no way be called a musical composition; it is a 'composition' which has absolutely no connection with the art of music."

Which reminds me maybe of ways that some of us might have felt listening to that improvisation yesterday, that extraordinary improvisation by the traumatised person

that we were played, which raises a fascinating question: if music expresses something as powerfully as that does, is it actually therefore a good piece of music, however much it may fly in the face of our aesthetic criteria? Shostakovich expresses extraordinarily, I think, in the 8th symphony, something of what it is to live through an experience like the invasion the Russians experienced, the massive destruction they experienced in World War II but was it indeed too much or was Russia not ready for what it was that he had to express? Was this why there was such an angry reaction to this music? Is there a time to bear witness and a time to wait to bear witness? That's something we're going to come back to in a moment. This kind of music, clearly, it seems, is involved in that trauma, there doesn't seem to be much doubt about it, the regular repetitive rhythmic machine like, war-machineness of the third movement and then the explosion, the cathartic outpouring of horror and grief at the beginning of the fourth.

[Music plays.]

I had better move on very quickly to my last extract, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Benjamin Britten, of course a great friend of Shostakovich, and a lot in common. The remarkable, I wish I could say more about it, but one of the most extraordinary things about the *War Requiem* is the way Britten synthesises or draws together the poetry of Wilfred Owen, the great First World War poet, and the words of the Latin mass. Again and again, he finds extraordinary correspondences between the subjects of Owen's often despairing poetry and the words of the requiem rite. The section which for me is most remarkable comes at the end of the final movement, the libera me, free me oh Lord. Britten takes Owen's poem *Strange Meeting*, the poem he was writing at his death, the poem is incomplete, where two soldiers meet each other in hell and realise they have been killed in battle and the poem ends with the words "let us sleep now". With an extraordinary bit of musical grafting, Britten follows that with the words of the final prayer of the requiem, where the coffin is carried out of the church and the priest sends the body on his way, in paradisum, may he be received into paradise. This is a truly extraordinary moment, where for a moment it seems there is an answer to the prayer "let us sleep now" but even that also is followed, as with Beethoven, by dissonance. It's on the bells, the big question mark still lingers. Hope, possibility of reconciliation, dissonance. Rarely contained, I think, so beautifully in one single musical statement.

[Music plays.]

That great vision of hope, and then the dissonant sounds. Wonderful, as with Beethoven, the possibility and the doubt, held, I think, concurrently. I don't know what it is that that music does that is so important, but it does, there is something in the image of hope at the same time doubt that it presents us with so radiantly that is in some important sense part of how human beings can maybe come to terms with the legacy of their own will to conflict.