Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem*
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Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) wrote many works for chorus and orchestra, all spread throughout his very long career. The "anthology" choral form suited him: he enjoyed selecting and setting great texts, and the genre contains some of his finest work.
Dona nobis pacem comes from the early Thirties. The composer meant it as a warning against war. This led some early commentators to call the work "prophetic" of World War II, but the war Vaughan Williams probably had in mind was the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The texts come from the mass, Whitman, the Bible, and John Bright – another anthology work. For years, I thought of it as the precursor to Britten's War Requiem but only because I knew of no other similar British "anthology" work on the same subject. However, I found out that Arthur Bliss beat out Vaughan Williams with Morning Heroes of 1928. So Vaughan Williams gets no prize for being first. Still, the work still hits with power, and, again, I feel it as Vaughan Williams's paying his debt to the Verdi Requiem. Consider this excerpt from Vaughan Williams's essay "A Musical Autobiography":

> By that time I had quite recovered from my Gounod fever and had become the complete prig. Bach, Beethoven (ex-officio), Brahms, and Wagner were the only composers worth considering.… I heard Verdi's Requiem for the first time. At first I was properly shocked by the frank sentimentalism and sensationalism of the music. I remember being particularly horrified at the drop of a semitone on the word "Dona." Was not this the purest "village organist"? But in a very few minutes the music possessed me. I realized that here was a composer who could do all the things which I with my youthful pedantry thought wrong, indeed, would be unbearable in a lesser man; music which was sentimental, theatrical, occasionally even cheap, and yet was an overpowering masterpiece. That day I learnt that there is nothing in itself that is "common or unclean," indeed that there are no canons of art except that contained in the well-worn tag, "To thine own self be true."

Aside from the beautiful sense of the passage, note the "drop of a semitone" on "Dona" – Vaughan Williams does exactly the same on the identical word. A setting of Whitman's "Beat, beat, drums!" recalls, particularly in its use of the bass drum and its key shifts by thirds, Verdi's "Dies irae." The two works also resemble one another in their genesis: decades separated the first notes from the last. Verdi, of course, started with the "Libera me" as his contribution to a collaborative requiem for Rossini. The death of Manzoni inspired the composer to incorporate this section into a complete, original setting of the requiem. Vaughan Williams wrote the "Dirge for Two Veterans" in 1914, possibly as part of a friendly competition with Holst. Holst's setting, characteristically spare, for male chorus and brass, concentrates its power. Vaughan Williams produced a symphonic march, not unlike the finale of his "London" symphony, which has grand, dramatic sweep. That both the Verdi and the Vaughan Williams sections fit into their newer forms with no stylistic jar strikes me as little short of amazing.

In fact, even though Dona nobis pacem runs through a gamut of styles – from the neo-Brahmsian song of Toward the Unknown Region, to the energy of Old King Cole of the Twenties, to the power of the recent Fourth Symphony – it never feels like a rummage sale, perhaps because the

word-setting strikes one as so right, no mean feat with the irregular cadences of Whitman. The oratorio falls into the following sections:

- Agnus Dei
- Beat, beat, drums! (Whitman)
- Reconciliation (Whitman)
- Dirge for Two Veterans (Whitman)
- The Angel of Death (John Bright, the Book of Jeremiah)
- O man greatly beloved (the Books of Haggai, Daniel, Micah, Leviticus, Psalms, Isaiah, and Luke)

"Agnus Dei" begins with the urgent cry of the solo soprano for peace. The section builds tension that bursts out with "Beat, beat, drums!" After volleys of percussion wild fanfares from the brass, reminiscent of Verdi's "Tuba mirum," the movement fades into "Reconciliation," "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" – a tender lullaby for all the dead. As the poet moves from the universal to the specific, Vaughan Williams changes his music to reflect the emptiness of grief. This leads to the powerful "Dirge." Then "The Angel of Death" gives way to a lament for the death of peace itself. This, too, passes, and we hear a strong call for peace. The final section, a forerunner of the passacaglia of Symphony #5, begins in Vaughan Williams' "pastoral" manner, here stiffened with a strong contrapuntal spine, breaks into a blaze of glory, and fades to the solo soprano's prayer for peace, this time another benediction. The oratorio's optimism turned out historically unjustified in the short run, but works of art that still speak to us have transcended history. The oratorio's hope doesn't come cheap, and, with Britten's War Requiem, it remains one of the most satisfying musical "answers" to the questions raised by war itself.