

Britten work fresh, modern and relevant

By IFAN PAYNE

REVIEW

UNIQUE though it may seem at first glance, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was in fact composed in a tradition that spans Mahler's *Symphony No 8*, Delius's *Requiem* and Michael Tippett's recent *The Mask of Time*.

Each work is joined by a common thematic concern by their use of large orchestral and vocal forces and by their idiosyncratic mixture of spiritual and secular texts.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the *War Requiem* is Delius's *Requiem* where, far from following the traditional form of the Mass, the composer shows a wide-ranging and personal selection of biblical texts. Further, Delius dedicated the work "to the memory of all young artists fallen in the war." In this he was referring to World War I.

Following World War II, Britten composed his *War Requiem* for performance in celebration of the consecration in May 1962 of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral.

Paradoxically Britten intertwined the words of the World War I poet Wilfred Owen with the liturgical text and strengthened this tie with an earlier age through the quotation set at the head of the score, a quotation which spoke from the then 44-year-old grave of Wilfred Owen. "My subject is war, and the pity of war. The Poetry is in the pity. All a poet can do today is warn."

But great heart is timeless and whatever its historical context *War Requiem* speaks to our post-Vietnam age of terrorism as powerfully as it

did in what seems now, strange to think it, that earlier simpler time.

The performance of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* in St David's Hall on Wednesday evening was presented by the Department of Music, University College, Cardiff, with help from the Llandaff Cathedral and Cardiff Bach Choirs.

The production of what was only the second performance in Wales of this masterpiece must be accounted a notable event. The performance took a while to gel into focus, but, under the incisive direction of conductor Clifford Bunford, the performance gathered itself together and by the *Tuba Mimum* chorus and orchestra were making an impact of total brilliance which culminated in the physically overpowering column of sound which is the climax of *Libera Me*.

Thenceforth the performance was one of bite and conviction, which conveyed well the power of the work.

To this the soloists Phyllis Cannan and Martyn Hill contributed strongly with baritone Stephen Roberts being particularly lucid and moving in his final solo.

Although the disposition of the forces in St David's Hall did not provide for the dramatic spatial which I recall from a Royal Albert Hall performance of over 15 years ago, Britten's *War Requiem* on Wednesday evening was reborn as fresh modern and relevant as ever.