

*Time's Echo**The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Music of Remembrance*

Jeremy Eichler

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First things first: Jeremy Eichler's narrative occupies 292 pages. These are followed by almost 100 pages of Acknowledgments, Notes (to which the main text has no links), Index, Illustration Credits (which do not have any numerical connection to the small, monochrome, captionless images embedded in the main text (this captionless policy apparently 'inspired' by the example of W G Sebald)), and Permissions Acknowledgements.

For I consider that music, by its very nature, is essentially powerless to express anything at all. [...] Expression has never been an inherent property of music.

Igor Stravinsky; *An Autobiography* (Norton, 1972).

Music expresses itself.

Igor Stravinsky (with Robert Craft); *Expositions and Developments* (Faber and Faber, 1962).

It isn't up to the painter to define the [visual] symbols. Otherwise it would be better if he wrote them out in so many words. The public who look at the picture must interpret the symbols as they understand them.

Pablo Picasso, quoted in E C Oppler (Ed.), *Picasso's Guernica* (Norton Critical Studies, 1988)

A painting is not thought out in advance. While it is being done it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it's finished it goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it.

Pablo Picasso, quoted in R Penrose, *Picasso: his life and work* (1985); see also p.3 of this account.

Picasso's *Guernica* is unambiguously titled yet it contains not a single visual element that can be seen to derive directly from the indiscriminate aerial destruction of the Basque village of Guernica, in 1937, by Hitler's air force in support of General Franco. Jeremy Eichler's comment – 'Art remembers what society would like to forget' (p.174) – appears to be unarguably applicable to *Guernica*, but if the mural's visual components, despite being graphically fixed and forever unchanging, have been left by their creator to be defined, uniquely, by each viewer, there seems little chance that the intangible and evanescent soundwaves propagated by the performance of a piece of music can define a specific 'memory' that is acknowledged and agreed by all.

Can a [music] score be said to be pointing at anything? I would suggest that what it points at is the music it partially represents through the medium of notation [...].

Ian MacDonald, in Ho and Feofanov (Eds.) *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (1998), p.643.

Jeremy Eichler's book arrives announcing its intent to recover the reality of a specific historical past – World War II in general and the Holocaust in particular – through the musical-performance present of four disparate compositions (disparate both geographically and stylistically): Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen* (1945), Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), Britten's *War Requiem* (1962), and Shostakovich's *Symphony no.13* (1962). Only the first composition is wordless.

Eichler's intentions and beliefs are expounded in the 16 pages of his opening *Prelude*:

The role of music in particular as an "unconscious chronicle" – as a witness to history and as a carrier of memory for a post-Holocaust world – is the subject of this book. (p.7)

These musical works may be seen as vital repositories of cultural memory, objects in which the living past still resides. (p.15)

Searching for the unspoken messages of these musical works, and reflecting on how music as such carries forward these messages*, is a primary task of this book. (p.12)

* [Unspoken messages are surely unknowable.]

The war-haunted memorials each of [the four composers] created are extraordinary on their own terms, but also for the considerable light they still cast, one that simultaneously shines backward into the past, forward towards our own era, and sideways[?] to give us flashes of the worlds into which the music was born. (p.13)

This book seeks to reinscribe all of these musical works with some of the histories, lives, and landscapes they are capable of illuminating. My hope is that these stories – moments drawn from the cultural history and memory of music – will then become part of what we come to *hear* [Eichler's italics] in the works themselves. (p.7)

Three further statements are worth noting:

1. Eichler alerts the reader (p.27): 'Historians [...] often caution against so-called backshadowing, our persistent habit of viewing the past exclusively through the prism of what came afterward' but his warning comes too late for Eichler himself:

We tend to hear prewar recordings [...] through ears informed by our knowledge of the catastrophe [WWII/Holocaust] that lay ahead.* (p.24)

* [... really?]

2. [...] this book is also implicitly an argument for what I call deep listening – that is, listening with an understanding of music as time's echo. [...] without deep listening there is no memory in music's history. [...] Without deep listening, the voices of the past are whispering into the void. (p.15)

Given the myriad layers of knowledge which are needed by a listener – an 'ordinary' concert-goer – in order to have even the faintest grasp of the creative strategies and techniques used by a composer, or to be aware of the thicket of historical realities and falsities through which the being-heard piece of music passed as it was brought into existence, 'deep listening' stands as unachievable for almost all.

Take, for example, an 'ordinary' concert-goer who, prior to a concert performance of String Quartet no.8 by Dmitri Shostakovich, has glanced at the programme-booklet text (which refers to the dedication printed in the score: *In memory of the victims of fascism and war* (cf. boxed text below)) but has not read Elizabeth Wilson's commentary:

Ostensibly [the Quartet] was conceived [in 1960] under the impression of the horrific scale of destruction wrought on Dresden [...] However, this theme served, at most, as a superficial stimulus.

– nor the letter that Shostakovich wrote to his friend Isaak Glikman:

One could write on the frontispiece "Dedicated to the author of this quartet" [...] the quartet makes use of themes from my works and from the revolutionary song 'Tormented by Grievous Bondage'. My own themes are the following: from the First Symphony, the Eighth Symphony, the Piano Trio, the [First] Cello Concerto, and *Lady Macbeth*. There are also some allusions to Wagner's Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung* and the second subject of the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. And I forgot – there's also a theme from my Tenth Symphony. Quite something – this little miscellany! [...] The pseudo-tragedy[?!] of the quartet is so great that, while composing it, my tears flowed as abundantly as urine after downing half a dozen beers.

Elizabeth Wilson; *Shostakovich: a life remembered* (Faber and Faber, 2006) pp.380-381.

"This recording of the Eighth Quartet offers Shostakovich's most intensely autobiographical and personal testimony about the tyranny and suffering of his time. In response to the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the devastation of Europe from WWII bombing, Shostakovich dedicated this music to the victims of fascism and war."

Back-cover commentary on the 1999 Deutsche Grammophon CD recording (289 459 670) by the Emerson Quartet of Quartet no.8.

Therefore, during the performance, the concert-goer will be unaware that the Quartet no.8 presents an autobiographical ‘miscellany’ drawn out of the work of a composer who, in 1960, aged 54, had finally capitulated to relentless pressure (mixed with threats) and had joined the Communist Party, was on the edge of suicide, and, to that end, had purchased a large number of sleeping pills. In light of the concert-goer’s non-awareness of Shostakovich’s existential turmoil, in light of the concert-goer’s state of unknowing, an argument for ‘deep listening’ misses the point.

Conversely, even if a listener is comprehensively well-informed about the historical/political context of Quartet no.8 – even if he/she knows all the pieces identified in Shostakovich’s letter to Glikman and can identify them as they appear in the performance – does all that awareness and knowledge enhance an appreciation (enjoyment?) of the quartet when performed?, or does it act as a distraction?, or is all that expertise simply left on one side while the notes are being played and the music created?

And when [the composition is] finished it goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is [listening to] it. [See second quotation from Pablo Picasso, on p.1]

3. In concluding his narrative (p.290), Eichler issues a dubious admonition:

The music of Beethoven, for instance, should not sound the same before and after Auschwitz. It cannot mean the same thing. To hear the Ninth Symphony [today] without hearing the scars* inflicted on it by the intervening centuries is to turn its sincere idealism into a kind of feel-good freedom kitsch.

* [Presumably the deepest scar would be the performance conducted by Furtwangler in 1942 for Hitler’s 53rd birthday; see Eichler, p.75.]

What Beethoven’s Ninth ‘meant’ when it was first heard in 1824, or when it was broadcast across Germany on Hitler’s birthday in 1942, or ‘means’ in 2023, is open to an unlimited range of opinion. The Ninth – as a piece of music – cannot be shackled to a singular event of untrammelled barbarism; the ‘dots and lines’ of the Ninth (or any other collection of such vaguely communicative musical symbols) do not change their technical meaning depending on the date when those instructions are uniquely implemented by conductor, orchestral players, and singers. How an implementation is *heard* is entirely personal, and a listener’s response can be generalised or highly specific, or any state inbetween, or, indeed, constantly vacillating between every possible level of attention and/or inattention.

Richard Strauss, *Metamorphosen*

Eichler’s need for his musical exemplars to bear witness (and that which was witnessed to be recoverable anew from within present-day performances) necessitates his surrounding the four compositions with extensively researched contexts – historical, social, political, aesthetic – and all of these are exhaustively delineated, but he says almost nothing about the four pieces as they are defined by the dots and lines on sheets of music-manuscript paper. As soon as Eichler begins to address the notational detail of Strauss’s *Metamorphosen*, the reader enters a land of vague description:

The score begins with a mysterious upwelling from the cellos and basses, a rising gesture underpinned by a descending chromatic line that summons, even if subconsciously, ancient ritual tropes of mourning. (p.105)

As can be seen in Fig. 1 the slip-sliding chordal sequence in the first two bars is distributed across all five cellos in the ensemble (stemmed up in Fig. 1) together with a single double-bass (stemmed down); the ball-park volume for all six instruments is specified as *piano*. The descending chromatic line played by the double-bass (plus cellos 4 and 5 one octave higher) will not be heard as summoning ‘ancient

ritual tropes of mourning’, nor should it ever thus be heard: Strauss’s careful judgement is that one double-bass will balance seamlessly with the five cellos, and this unanimity will ensure that all six instruments are heard as one aurally-indivisible group – i.e. the double-bass is a sixth cello (and note also that the sounding pitches played by the bass sit within the low range of a cello).

Fig. 1 Strauss, *Metamorphosen*, bars 1 & 2



Fig. 2 *Metamorphosen*, bars 9-11, Violas 4 & 5



Fig. 3 Beethoven, Symphony no.3, movement II, *Marcia funebre*



Perhaps somewhat uncomfortable with his overly forceful statement regarding the opening bars of *Metamorphosen* (‘... that summons, even if subconsciously ...’) Eichler passes on to generalisations couched in florid language:

[...] the music at times surges and crests almost wildly, as if its expressive content might overwhelm the slender vessel of its form, while at other times it spirals outward to envelop the listener in a delicate haze of beauty and rue. (p.105)

Eichler tries again (see Fig. 2, second bar, and Fig. 3, third complete bar):

Together the violas sing out a second theme made up of three insistent quarter notes [crotchets] that push inexorably toward a downbeat followed by four gently falling notes coupled in halting, short-long pairs. (p.105)

According to his first biographer [Willi Schuh], however, Strauss himself did not realize until he had nearly arrived at the score’s ending that this very motif contained within itself a direct quotation from the sublimely tragic funeral march of Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony.* [...] In Beethoven’s hands the march had already served as a memorial to fallen ideals.** Now Strauss joined Beethoven’s voice to his own [...]. (pp.105-6)

* [The present writer regards this claim of ignorance as wholly implausible.]

** [Beethoven completed his Symphony no.3 in the spring of 1804; it is unclear which ‘fallen ideals’ he was apparently memorialising in the symphony’s *Marcia funebre*. First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte was proclaimed Emperor Napoleon I on 18 May 1804; a referendum to approve his elevation was held in November 1804 and 99% of those who voted approved; Napoleon and Joséphine were crowned on 2 December 1804. Beethoven, on learning the news from Paris, tore out the original dedication – *Geschriben auf Bonaparte* – on the title page of his manuscript score.]

Eichler says nothing more about the compositional specifics of *Metamorphosen*, and sums up:

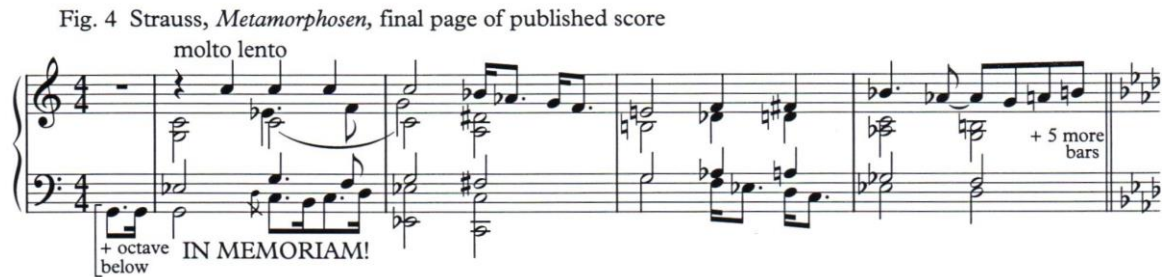
Part of its spell also lies in its binding together of opposites: sincerity and inscrutability, expression and elision. The music’s own profound sense of knowing stands in perfect equipoise with its profound unknowability. (p.120)

Strauss was 81 years old in 1945 when he composed *Metamorphosen*; he would die four years later. It is perfectly possible to hear *Metamorphosen* (as does Eichler) as a ‘memorial’, but a memorial to what? – to Strauss himself for wearing the delusional cloak of Nazi supremacy? – to the overall death and destruction brought about by WWII? – to the specific horror wreaked upon the Jews of Europe? – to

the withering of the vine on which ‘classical’ music had flourished for 500 years? – to the personal realisation of imminent ending? Who knows? It’s a piece of music; perhaps it just expresses itself.

Ten bars before the end of *Metamorphosen* Strauss – using three cellos and the three basses – quotes the first half of the theme from Beethoven’s *Marcia funebre* (Symphony no.3, *Eroica*) (Fig. 4) and adds the words IN MEMORIAM! below the first complete bar of the theme.* Presumably this was simply a reference to Beethoven’s life and work, which, in ways unknown to Strauss, was consistently characterised by the unceasing pursuit of musical truths, despite persistent personal adversity.

* [It is assumed that the Boosey & Hawkes score is accurately replicating Strauss’s manuscript at this point.]



Eichler, with heavy emphasis, comments:

It is as if precisely here, in these four measures [bars], German music had finally resumed the act of listening to itself, seeing itself from the outside [...], and Strauss – at once a living embodiment of this tradition and an actor indelibly implicated in its wholesale collapse – had finally grasped that this immense cultural patrimony could, at such a late hour, be rightfully summoned by its own name for one final task alone: to serve as a memorial to itself. (pp.107-8)

In one of those delightful and unexpected connections which music is always capable of providing it can be seen that the principal melodic phrase in the notorious ‘Adagio’ which was created by Remo Giazotto, c.1949, above a bass-line fragment supposedly composed by Tomaso Albinoni, is a near-perfect copy of the descending phrase seen in Fig. 2:

Fig. 5 The Albinoni *Adagio* (Remo Giazotto, c.1949)



Arnold Schoenberg, *A Survivor from Warsaw*

When Eichler’s attention moves to Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* [ASfW] he finds himself in yet more difficulties since no reader of his book will appreciate being presented with an analysis of the composition’s 12-tone/serial construction; therefore, superficial description and special pleading is all that is left:

The opening trumpet call, a jagged vaulting gesture over gnashing dissonant strings, instantly establishes the work’s distinctive sound world [...]. Military drumrolls enter and then vanish. Tremolos growl up from the cellos and basses. [...] the music streams by in a series of detailed flashes. [Cellists] strike their strings with the wooden stick of the bow. A high Piccolo stammers out an irregular rhythm, as if dreaming of Mahler’s famous birdcalls over the abyss.* (p.143)

* [A careful study of the score of ASfW has failed to find any evidence for this high-pitched stammering Piccolo.]

Eichler enthusiastically refers to the manner in which

Schoenberg saves the [12-note] row's most dramatic presentation for the chorus's final singing of the *Shema*. This remarkable unison entrance [...] comes at the peak of a masterfully constructed orchestral crescendo across which the tempo gradually increases and the music's expressive tension rises to an almost unbearable level. [...] the chorus's entrance is a moment of immense power, some of which may flow from its subliminal evocation of that original and most iconic of choral moments in the heaven-storming finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. (p.143)

Eichler's concluding comment is countered by Richard Taruskin:

Were the name of its composer not surrounded by a historiographical aureole, were its musical idiom [i.e. serialism] not safeguarded by its inscrutability, its B-movie clichés – the Erich von Stroheim Nazi barking 'Achtung', the kitsch-triumphalism of the climactic, suddenly tonal[?] singing of the Jewish credo – would be painfully obvious, and no-one would ever think to program such banality alongside Beethoven's Ninth as has become fashionable. That kind of post-Auschwitz poetry is indeed a confession of art's impotence.

R Taruskin, 'A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the 21st Century', *New York Times*, 24 August 1997.

Again, Eichler loads his commentary –

Even before the narrator enters in the twelfth measure with the line "I cannot remember ev'rything", a listener may sense in the music's fractured surfaces the traces of trauma as recollected by an unstable memory. (pp.142-3)

– but if a listener does not 'sense in the music's fractured surfaces the traces of trauma ...' is he/she in some way failing in his/her responsibility to be a 'deep listening' witness?

Conversely, Eichler does not shy away from shining a light on Schoenberg's dubious ethical position with regard to *ASfW*: the score-manuscript apparently shows that 'This text [i.e. the narrator's text] is based partly on reports which I have received directly or indirectly', but, in a letter to the composer and critic Kurt List, Schoenberg wrote:

What [does] the text of 'Survivor' mean to me? It means [...] a warning to all Jews, never to forget what has been done to us. [...] We should never forget this, even if such things have not been done in the manner in which I describe in the 'Survivor'. This does not matter. The main thing is, that I saw it in my imagination. (p.145)

On a purely practical level, Eichler might have addressed the great difficulties faced by the men's chorus in pitching their unison singing of the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, with its Hebrew text, given that their tone-row melody (which is doubled, at the same pitch, by a Trombone) is mostly angular and harmonically rootless (see Fig. 6 overleaf), and, in performance, the melody is potentially disrupted by sheets of dissonance layered above and below by the orchestra. It is worth noting that at the time of writing the present review (December 2023) there were four videos of performances of *ASfW* available on YouTube; all four conductors adopt a *much* slower speed for the prayer than is specified by Schoenberg, i.e. crotchet = 52-56 in the four videos instead of crotchet = 80 as in Schoenberg's score. The impracticability of Schoenberg's tempo, especially with respect to the pitch sequences required in the second half of the prayer (and most particularly for singers who are not naturally comfortable with Hebrew as a language) raises doubts about Schoenberg's sensitivity to live-performance communication.

It is worth noting that Beethoven's melody for his *Ode to Joy* is built from just the first five pitches of the D-major scale, and up-and-down scales define most of the melodic shaping; see Fig.7.

Fig. 6 Schoenberg, *A Survivor from Warsaw*.

The image shows a musical score for Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, measures 80 to 94. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 4/4. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 80. The music features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. A text annotation 'Men's chorus doubled by solo trombone.' is placed between measures 80 and 86. The score ends with a double bar line and a fermata over the final note.

Fig. 7 Beethoven, Symphony no. 9, *Ode to Joy*

The image shows a musical score for Beethoven's Symphony no. 9, *Ode to Joy*. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a time signature of 4/4. The music consists of a simple, rhythmic melody of eighth and quarter notes.

Benjamin Britten, *War Requiem*

With Britten's *War Requiem* Eichler struggles to connect the piece to World War II in general and/or to the Holocaust in particular. Britten's grandiose collection of performers – a large orchestra (triple woodwind, six horns, four trumpets, *etc.*), a separate chamber ensemble of twelve instruments, large mixed chorus, boys' choir, and three soloists (soprano, tenor, and baritone) – certainly filled the spaces of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral in 1962 but whether the more inward and delicate settings of Wilfred Owen's poems could resonate (in both senses of that word) in such an environment is questionable. In an audio recording, of course, the imbalance between public utterance and private poetry can easily be overcome with the mixing-console's faders (as is particularly obvious in the Decca recording conducted by the composer).

Eichler quickly steps through some thoughts about Britten's setting of Owen's poems but then brings up his central objection to the *War Requiem*, namely the absence of any mention of the Holocaust notwithstanding Britten performing nine concerts with Yehudi Menuhin in Germany, in July 1945, with the first of the concerts being for Jews who had been liberated from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp). Eichler reports –

After Britten's death, Pears elaborated that the composer had in fact never been able to speak about the events of July 1945 until near the very end of his life, at which point he had said "how shocking it was, and that the experience had coloured everything he had written subsequently." (p.198)

– and comments:

But when it came to creating his *War Requiem*, for whatever complex set of reasons, [Britten] clearly sought to make what he regarded as a universal statement; in so doing he left the darkness of more recent history unrecounted and unreconciled, and left these broader questions not so much unanswered as unasked. (p.221)

The end-notes (p.342) which connect with the above commentary cite Mervyn Cooke's monograph on the *War Requiem*, published in 1996 as a Cambridge Music Handbook. In his own end-note (p.107, fn.27) Cooke writes:

Controversy again surrounded the work in New York in 1995, when an article by Alex Ross entitled 'In music, though, there were no victories' (*New York Times*, 20 August) explored the extraordinary sentiment that 'a work so steeped in the philosophy of pacifism is sadly inappropriate to the circumstances of World War II'.

Since Cooke quotes from Ross's article only the half-sentence shown above, and since Eichler does not quote anything at all, it is worth looking at more of Ross's 3,500-word article:

In the war that ended 50 years ago, music lost on all sides. Classical composers, who had achieved a substantial degree of social influence at the turn of the century, failed miserably to have any effect or even make a plausible comment on the terrors accumulating around them. Protests fell short; triumph sounded hollow. Greatly gifted Jewish composers died in Nazi concentration camps; German composers fled to exile, fell silent, or compromised themselves, and many of the victors and survivors retreated en masse into intellectual obscurity, trying with mixed success to confront the war's cultural, social, and spiritual aftermath.

Music is adept at the larger, vaguer emotions, like joy and despair. Joy or despair at what, the listener decides; anything more particular, such as political protest, usually falls outside the composer's reach.

When Benjamin Britten set about composing his war memorial in 1961 he had the advantage of unimpeachable personal involvement in his subject; the focus of his "War Requiem", a synthesis of Latin texts and anti-war poems by Wilfred Owen, was to be the urgency of peace, and his lifelong commitment to pacifism put him in good stead. [...]

The "War Requiem" culminates in a scene of intimate reconciliation between an English and a German soldier after death; [...] It is at this point that something rings false. A work so steeped in the philosophy of pacifism is sadly inappropriate to the circumstances of World War II, in which Adolf Hitler nearly conquered Europe by playing virtuosically on the passive temperament of Western democracies. The closing words, "Let us sleep now", are an empty reassurance, whether in 1962 or 1995.

Alex Ross's article was followed, on 10 September 1995, by a short (edited?) letter from Burton Caine:

Alex Ross is right to take exception to Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" as "sadly inappropriate to the circumstances of World War II," but for reasons not stated. Mr. Ross takes no notice of the criticism that Britten considers only the British, German, and Soviet victims of the war and ignores the six million Jews, among others, killed in the Holocaust.

Although writing that Britten presents a "synthesis of Latin texts and anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen," Mr. Ross does not mention that in the process Britten [Owen?] twisted the biblical story of the binding of Isaac by having Abraham disobey the angel of God and murder his son Isaac and "half the seed of Europe, one by one." In contrast, Britten juxtaposes "Lord Jesus Christ, King of Glory ... God of power and might / Heaven and Earth are full of Thy glory." *

The message is one of exultation of Christianity and contempt for Judaism. This is grim news after the Holocaust.

* **TO CLARIFY:** At the start of the Offertorium in Britten's *War Requiem* the following Latin text is sung by the Boys' Choir, accompanied by the organ:

Domine, Jesu Christe, Rex gloriae, libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum de poenis inferni, et de profundo lacu: libera eas de ore leonis, ne absorbeat eas tartarus, ne cadant in obscurum.

Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory, deliver the souls of all the faithful departed from the pains of Hell and the bottomless pit. Deliver them from the jaws of the lion, lest Hell engulf them, lest they be plunged into darkness.

The continuation of the Latin text is sung by the mixed chorus accompanied by the full orchestra:

Sed signifer sanctus Michale repraesentet eas in lucem sanctam: quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini ejus.

But let the holy standard-bearer Michael lead them into the holy light, as once you promised to Abraham and to his seed.

These Latin texts are then followed by the presentation of Owen's poem 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', sung by the Tenor and Baritone soloists accompanied by the 12-player chamber ensemble; the Parable is a revision (a 'twisting'?) of the Old Testament text which is found at Genesis, Chapter 22:

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he [the angel] said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

Owen's 'Parable':
So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! An angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so. But slew his son, –
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

The following Latin text is sung by the Boys' Choir after the ending of Owen's poem:

Hostias e preces tibi Domine laudus offerimus: tu suscipe pro animabus illis, quarum hodie memoriam facimus: fac eas, Domine, de morte transire ad vitam.

Sacrifices and prayers we offer to Thee, Lord, with praise: receive them for the souls of those whose memory we recall today: make them, Lord, to pass from death to life.]

NB1: The Latin text continues and concludes with:

Quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini eius

As once you promised to Abraham and to his seed.

– but this text-repetition is not used by Britten, presumably because it would make no sense coming after Owen's *but slew ... half the seed of Europe.*]

NB2: It will have been noticed that the Latin text which Mr Burton Caine quotes – after the ellipsis – is not included in the Latin text of the Offertorium.

Mr Caine's letter was followed by a response from Arthur Shippee, published on 8 October:

Burton Caine lodged a baseless criticism against Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem", accusing Britten of ignoring victims and twisting stories.

Mr. Caine knows that Britten used poems by Wilfred Owen, but he does not seem to realize that the text he mentions is one of Owen's own poems, not a retelling by Britten. Mr. Caine also seriously misinterprets the poem. The binding of Isaac has been retold many times in both Jewish and Christian traditions. For Britten and Owen, it was an Old Testament story, part of Christianity and without reference to Judaism, and Owen's poem reflects this tradition.

In the poem, Abraham ['Abram'], the "old man", represents the political leadership of a Christian Europe that when called upon by God to "offer [in sacrifice] the Ram of Pride instead of him ['him' being Isaac, Abraham's son] . . . would not so, but slew his son, and half the seed of Europe, one by one." The criticism is aimed at the statesmen and politicians of World War I who were ready to send young men to death in the name of a cause that was in reality only their own stiff pride.

If this poem has any religion in mind, it is institutional Christianity in its support of what Owen felt was an unjust and ungodly war. Judaism is simply not in view in Owen's context of World War I or in Britten's [context] of World War II.* To imagine that Britten's message was "one of exultation of Christianity and contempt for Judaism" is a case of ignoring the historical context and Britten's own religiosity and of twisting the meaning of Owen's text and Britten's setting. It is grim news if such a bizarre charge gains any currency.

* [But, as Eichler suggests, there is no evidence in Britten's *War Requiem* of a World War II context.]

The absence of any reference to the Holocaust in the *War Requiem* leads Jeremy Eichler to comment:

The absence is striking, and from today's perspective it narrows the work's ethical scope, for it says precisely nothing about a twentieth-century barbarism that makes Owen's tales of "bugles calling for them from sad shires" sound of a different world.*

* [The 'different world' is hardly to be wondered at.]

Given Eichler's ambivalence towards Britten's *War Requiem* the reader may wonder why the piece was selected for inclusion in *Time's Echo*.

Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony no.13*

Eichler glances at a little of the compositional content of the first movement of Shostakovich's Symphony no.13 but says nothing at all about the music of the four movements which follow. Subsequently, although Eichler writes at length about Symphony no.14 he says not a word about no.15, which, in terms of its sophistication of musical thought, inhabits another planet when compared to the blunt word painting and musical caricatures of no.13 – not that these simplicities in any way minimise the bravery involved in composing no.13 as is (although perhaps Yevgeny Yevtushenko didn't appreciate being pinned to the cross-hairs of potential, officially-sanctioned, destruction). Perhaps Eichler's focus on no.14 is because it has texts, from which 'understandings' and 'interpretations' can be more easily extracted (cf. Pablo Picasso's commentary) whereas no.15 has nothing but intangible orchestral tones, including musical quotations, references, and allusions which are beyond anyone's certain explanation as to why they are included.

In relation to Symphony no.13 Eichler quotes from a letter written by Shostakovich –

'I am not expecting this work to be fully understood, but I cannot *not* write it.'

– and comments:

That sense of inner necessity is palpable in the music itself.* [...] A chorus of basses [...] enter in unison to intone the opening lines of the poem (“No monument stands over Babi Yar”), the rise and fall of their burnished voices conveying the solemnity of an ancient religious ritual. (p.258)

* [... really?]

The first entry of the male chorus (see Fig.8) – slow crotchets and quavers, low in pitch and marked *piano* and *espressivo* – is an entirely unremarkable musical moment; it does not justify being inflated by Eichler with unwarranted imagery:

Fig. 8 Shostakovich, Symphony no.13, movement I, first entry of male chorus



Nad Babyim Yarom pamyatnikov nyet.	Over Babi Yar there are no monuments.
Krutoi bryv, kak gruboye nadgrobye.	The steep precipice is like a crude gravestone.
Mne strashno.	I am terrified.
Mne sevodnya stolko let,	I am as old today
Kak samomu yevreiskomu narodu.	As all Jewish people.

(Transliteration and translation of Yevtushenko's Russian text by Valeria Vlazinskaya.)

Is 'I' Shostakovich himself? – 'I am terrified – I am as old ...'
 Do the final four lines of Yevtushenko's poem encapsulate Shostakovich's sense of personal identity?

There is no Jewish blood in mine,
 But I am adamantly hated
 By all anti-Semites as if I were a Jew.
 That is why I am a true Russian!

Eichler acknowledges that

Subtlety is not a quality closely associated with what we may call first-generation memory art, and Yevtushenko's poem thunders its truths with a directness that calls to mind Schoenberg's chorus of men defiantly rising up with the *Shema Yisrael*.* But Shostakovich's music deepens and dignifies [Yevtushenko's] text without blunting the audacity of the work's sentiment, its full-throated call for a Russianness made more authentic through its solidarity with a persecuted minority. [p.259]

* [But the directness of the music composed by Shostakovich for his male chorus could hardly be further away from the 12-tone convolutions required by Schoenberg.]

Eichler does not provide any musical illumination of the subsequent four movements of Symphony no.13: 'Humour', 'At the Store', 'Fears', and 'Careers'.

Clearly, Eichler's book is the work of a cultural commentator who has thought long and hard about the thrust of his narrative, and has used a multitude of interwoven sources to underpin his central contention; as an example of academic endeavour spread over many years the book is admirable, and Eichler's efforts must be applauded. The learning to be gained by the reader with respect to the politicised cultural history of the twentieth century is considerable but whether the reader, having reached the end of the book, will thereafter and therefore engage more 'deeply' with the four compositional exemplars (and with many others which are also associated with World War II and/or the Holocaust, and are also 'objects in which the living past still resides') is, in the present writer's opinion, doubtful.
