

MUSIC

“Serious music is a dead art. The vein which for three hundred years offered a seemingly inexhaustible yield of beautiful music has run out. What we know as modern music is the noise made by deluded spectators picking through the slagpile.” - Henry Pleasants 1955

Benjamin Britten's War Requiem and György Ligeti's Lux Aeterna, works utilising components of traditional and sacred music, defy Pleasant's belief in the 'death' of serious music and thus render his comment irrational. Both pieces hold hymnal qualities and cleverly use parts to complement one another – not unlike the creators of 'beautiful music' from previous eras.

The Dies Irae section of Britten's War Requiem is predominantly for choir and brass (other parts are used, but not as markedly). These groups are stylistically quite different; the brass is fanfaric and emblematic of the bugle calls of warfare – alluding to the Requiem's conceptual basis – while the choir sings a traditional Dies Irae hymn from the traditional Latin text. Britten has not, however, created these sections to be contrasting. The tension evident throughout the piece, as expressed through the brass's heavy motifs and the sharpness of vocal quality, is uniform and seamlessly connects disparate parts. Britten uses conventional tonality to drive the energy of the piece, with harmonies often in thirds and fifths to clearly state the chordal nature of the Requiem.

The use of motifs in this piece enables it to retain interest regardless of the similarities in sound between instruments. In brass sections, the trumpets, trombones and horns all have individual motifs that are played at varying degrees of dynamic and expressive energy and the continuation of these is able to lead into the vocal parts with ease. The choir, split into male and female voices, starts separately and strongly; when together, however, it is hushed and quiet to signify the end of the piece and display a great sense of control – both in performance and composition – across both separate parts. Britten does not create an overtly 'modern' work in any conventional sense, but rather utilises the techniques and approaches of composers from previous eras to combine a hymnal, sacred work into his conceptual War Requiem.

Similarly to Britten, Ligeti incorporates traditional techniques and elements into his composition to lend to it a timelessness unmarked by his position as a 'modern' composer. Lux Aeterna is scored for 16 solo voices and is set to a traditional Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. The sacred words of the text are not presented traditionally, however. The staidness and atmosphere created by Ligeti was achieved through the staidness of individual parts; singing initially in harmonic unison, each of the eight opening parts enter at different intervals to achieve an eerie, pulsing staidness. Parts move slowly, and sound delayed as they follow each other in individual time. Lyrically, the traditional words are lost in the murky dissonance Ligeti creates, but their syllables provide intriguing accents on various notes.

Regardless of its completely dissonant nature, Lux Aeterna is not without a tonal centre; this shifts however, and due to the density of texture in the piece is almost imperceptible to hear as it occurs. The irregularity of each part's movement means that any sense of tonality becomes warped before it can become stable – instead of arriving at a new tonal point, each part shifts individually and this builds tension instead of creating stability in tone.

Ligeti's use of sacred text and completely intricate setting of 16 vocal parts is not overtly 'modern', but instead sounds hymnal due to the ethereal sounds produced by the meticulousness of composition. Each part is carefully set, and integral to the piece as a whole; it is not haphazardly put together or unnecessarily dissonant. The intricacy of Lux Aeterna proves its 'seriousness' and clearly has a strong basis in music of previous eras.

Britten and Ligeti, 'modern' composers with greatly differing styles, do not fit Pleasants's approximation of the modern composer; their works, crafted carefully and subtly, take great influence from music of the past whilst retaining contemporary interest. Neither War Requiem nor Lux Aeterna are radically 'modern' – rather, the techniques and methods employed to create them are firmly entrenched in the 'serious music' of the past.