

Mary

The Body Politic – week 1 homework

Piece 1: An epiphany – something that changed the way I looked at art, and the world through art.

When I was at music college, I found by accident the most remarkable song, by an otherwise relatively unremarkable composer, working just after the First World War. Ivor Gurney had set a poem by Elizabethan poet, John Fletcher, called "Sleep". The music transposes the text to the mental trauma of a shell-shocked soldier, and the desperate yearning for psychological escape and unsettling musical pathos, had a lasting and profound effect on me.

I became intrigued by the music and poetry of war and, in studying Britten's War Requiem for my dissertation, discovered how art has a wider role to play besides 'entertainment', and it is something I have been aware of ever since.

In brief, the combination of Wilfred Owen's searing, actualistic, technically beautiful and, above all, Messianic poetry – "Am I not a conscientious objective, with a very seared conscience?" – with the post war generation's need for atonement (manifested here in Britten), culminates in one of the most effortful, awesomely powerful 'though flawed, pieces of parabolic art ever written.

Britten took much of his artistic education from the circle of writers he worked with in the 1930s, and the foremost of these for him was Auden. It is Auden's words that sum up the purpose of the Requiem, the war poetry, and all art that strives in urging us to 're-learn':

"Harrow the house of the dead; look shining at
New styles of architecture, a change of heart."