

## **November 11, 2021 – Nancy Van de Vate’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* & Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem***

As we observe Veterans’ Day on the Thursday Night Opera House, we honor the memory of all military personnel who died in war with a performance of Nancy Van de Vate’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, followed by Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, a hybrid liturgical work that utilizes by the Catholic *Mass for the Dead* and poems written during World War One by a British officer who died in battle a week before the November 11, 1918 armistice.

*All Quiet on the Western Front*, by the American-born Austrian composer Nancy Van de Vate (b. December 30, 1930), pays tribute to the sufferings of ordinary soldiers. Based on Erich Maria Remarque’s classic novel about young German conscripts during World War One, it had its world premiere in Osnabrück, Germany on September 28, 2003.

Paul Bäumer (tenor **Michael Polscer**), an enlisted soldier in the German army, is resting five miles behind the front following two weeks of trench warfare against the French. He and his former schoolmates—Kropp (bass-baritone **Josef Krenmair**), Müller (baritone **Steven Scheschareg**) and Leer (tenor **Marek Olbrzymek**)—are barely 19 years old. At a field hospital they visit another schoolmate, Kemmerich (**Olbrzymek**), who’s so shell-shocked that he doesn’t realize his wounded leg has been amputated. In another scene, Paul and his comrades use pilfered food rations to entice some French women to spend the night with them. Back home on leave, Paul learns from his sister Erna (soprano **Linda Healy-Steck**) that their mother (contralto **Martha Jane Howe**) has cancer. He visits another schoolmate, Mittelstädt (Scheschareg), who was wounded at the front and is now in charge of training a company of conscripted soldiers that includes Kantorek (tenor **Dominic Natoli**), their former schoolmaster, who had so enthusiastically urged them to enlist. Back at the front, Paul kills a French soldier. Horrified that he has taken the life of another human being, he promises he will take care of the dead soldier’s wife and child after the war. In late summer 1918, Paul and his squad leader Katczynski (**Scheschareg**) kill a goose and enjoy a feast. On the way back to their base, Katczynski is hit and Paul takes him to a field hospital, where he dies. Paul himself has been hit by shrapnel, and later in the day he too dies.

**Toshiyuki Shimada** conducts the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra in this 2003 recording.

In Act I, we hear the “How goes it, Franz?” scene with **Josef Krenmair**, **Marek Olbrzymek**, **Steven Scheschareg**, and **Michael Polscer**.

<https://youtu.be/417GdaaXfzU>.

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In 1962, British composer Benjamin Britten wrote his *War Requiem* for the re-consecration of Coventry’s Anglican Cathedral, which had been destroyed by German bombs during World War Two. He utilized the *Mass for the Dead* along with poetry of

Wilfred Owen, written during 1917 and 1918 while recovering in a military hospital following combat in France. Exactly one week before the Armistice, Lieutenant Owen was killed in action.

For the first performance, Britten insisted of having vocal soloists from three of the combatant nations involved in the war: English tenor **Peter Pears**, German baritone **Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau**, and Russian soprano **Galina Vishnevskaya**. (When the Minister of Culture refused to allow Vishnevskaya to travel outside the Soviet Union, she was replaced by English soprano **Heather Harper**.)

In this 1983 recording, **Sir Simon Rattle** conducts the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, the Boys of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and tenor **Robert Tear**, soprano **Elisabeth Söderström**, and baritone **Thomas Allen**.