MUSIC IN A TIME OF WAR

by Elizabeth Vercoe

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During the recent debate about Iraq at the United Nations Security Council, a tapestry woven to represent Picasso's famous painting, *Guernica*, perhaps the single most shocking and influential piece of art about war in the 20th century, was covered so as not to provide a disturbing visual backdrop for post-debate press conferences. The explanation was that "we had a problem with, ya know, the horse."

Interesting. The U.N. media spokesman didn't mention having a problem with the agonized mother with a dead child on her lap. Or with the huge dead soldier in the foreground. Or with the horror-struck woman with a lamp illuminating the slaughter. Well, ya know, perhaps he was right: the problem is the horse. It is terrified, rolling its eyes in fear, a spear piercing its side. Not a reassuring image as background for a cool discussion of war.

In 1937, Pablo Picasso, long exiled in France and already the most famous Spanish painter of his time, ruminated about a commission for a large painting for the Spanish Pavilion at the World Fair in Paris that year. He was considering a self-referential portrait of an artist's studio. Then, on a clear April day, Nazi planes began dropping bombs on a small Basque town called Guernica on market day and everything changed. The planes didn't bomb bridges or factories, just the houses and people, gunning them down in the fields as they fled. We know now that the campaign was to test a new German strategy, to so shock the people with overwhelming power that they would be too demoralized to resist the brutal advance of General Franco in his quest for control of Spain during the bloody Civil War that Hemingway and others had so romanticized.

Within weeks of the news of Guernica, Picasso had scrapped plans for the studio painting and begun a series of sketches of the powerful images soon to people his canvas called Guernica. Although he experimented with color, stark blacks and greys emerged as his final choices along with the quintessentially Spanish images of bull and horse that came to represent the courage and suffering of the Spanish people. The eyes of the bull are said to bear an uncanny resemblance to those of Picasso himself but he never explained his imagery. What he did say in a moment of anger at criticism was: "Paintings are not made to decorate apartment walls, they are instruments of war."

The further history of the painting is a compelling one: how it was exhibited in the U.S. to raise money to fight fascism in Spain, how it remained in New York for years as a safe haven during WW II, how Picasso's will instructed his lawyer to decide when Spain was sufficiently free and safe for the painting to go "home," how the Museum of Modern Art resisted the transfer, how the people thronged when it was finally installed in Madrid—a symbol of their suffering and new freedom—, how a mysterious blue line appeared on the opposite wall which study soon revealed was from the blue jeans of the crowds leaning against the wall while regarding the painting, how that white wall must still be repainted weekly—such is the scrutiny given the painting, how the Basques are still hoping to bring Guernica closer to the rebuilt town and to Frank Gehry's stunning museum where a chapel stands empty and waiting for its arrival.

Few great works of art have so captured the spirit of a people, representing their suffering but also (note the flower near the sword) representing their ability to endure. The symbols from the bullfight where men and beasts confront death may elude our understanding, but they touch something deep in the heart of the Spanish people, whom the great playwright Lorca identifies as a people in love with death.

And Guernica shows that art can be dangerous. Franco hated Picasso and his painting for its challenge to his regime and implication of his complicity in the bombing of a civilian population. And the U.S. refused Picasso a visa in the 1940s. (You can see the FBI files on Picasso in the library. They are open now under the Freedom of Information Act.)

Guernica was painted 66 years ago. 66 years before that, another art work was unveiled that had political ramifications and dealt with the subject of war, namely Giuseppe Verdi's opera, Aida. But where Guernica was a response to the horrors of war, Aida's Triumphal March seems to glory in war and victory. In fact, this March is still so popular in Egypt today that it precedes evening news reports and is played before football games. But in 1871 the premiere of Aida was given in Cairo to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. The opera's story of armies battling in the desert, showing the spoils of war in a triumphant processional, may seem—in Susan Sontag's words— to be an example of a work of art that has "shilled" for war. But like all art that lasts, closer inspection reveals Verdi's more complex view, one that shows how a people can be manipulated into war, how bloodthirsty a people can be, how an individual can turn against her country, and how an opera seemingly about war is really in the end a love story after all, albeit a tragic one ending with a cry for peace.

But the question remains: do patriotic marches, the novels of Hemingway, some wartime poetry, films like "Apocolypse Now" featuring Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries or movies like "Platoon" whose poignant use of Barber's Adagio for Strings made that music recognizable to nearly everyone or "Saving Private Ryan" "shill for war" in Sontag's words and support imperialist dreams? Or are these works more complex?

I wonder now myself, in my eagerness to capture the spirit of a young female warrior, in an excess of feminism perhaps, if in this music I too was guilty of "shilling for war." See what you think. Here are two exerpts from *Herstory 3* where the young Joan of Arc first says: "France is calling us. Let us vanquish or perish. A Frenchman must live for her, for her a Frenchman must die." Then she revels in her role as a soldier and, more dangerously, as a warrior servant of God.

Vercoe, "La France nous appelle" & "I Am A Soldier"
Performers: Dr. Sharon Mabry and Rosemary Platt.

Was Joan's war a just war to eject the English oppressors occupying France? Does the whole piece (not this excerpt) show the pity of war as well as the imagined glory?

I know for sure that Austin P's own distinguished composer, Jeffrey Wood, never "shills for war" in his works on this subject, even in a song about impending war. The piano motif representing trumpets that pervades this short song from his *Kriegeslieder* cycle is not one that conjures up glories to come, but instead has a quiet, relentlessness that is edgy and unnerving. The mood is one of unease, not bravado.

Wood, "Trompeten"
Performers: Lisa Conklin Bishop and Dr. Wood.

And now for some live performances. The first excerpt is from a brand new piece commissioned by Austin Peay that I have just finished. It will be premiered next Monday night on the Dimensions concert so this is a preview. This short movement was inspired by Paul Klee's drawing called "More Will Be Marching Soon," one of the artist's responses to the growing menace in Germany in 1934. This piece was written out of dread of the coming war and out of anger that any young person should die in a desert far from home. You will hear "Onward Christian Soldiers" quoted at the end of the introductory section and throughout the rest of the piece in different voices.

Live Performance: Vercoe, "More Will Be Marching Soon"
Performers: Lisa Vanarsdel, flute, and Patti Halbeck, piano

The next piece is the second of two songs in a group called "Ma mère, les étoiles."
The first song tells of a mother willing a connection to her daughter imprisoned at Auschwitz by watching a star she knows her daughter can see and thus sending her thoughts to her. The second song is the daughter's, in which she, too, watches the stars and a line of poetry comes to her that she can no longer remember when returned home. (You have the text.) The daughter is named Charlotte in the first poem, the name of the poet, Charlotte Delbo. Delbo survived Auschwitz but her husband, a member of the Resistance, was shot in 1942.

Live performance: Wood, "Mois aussi, je regardais les étoiles"

This music you have just heard by people you know and see every day is just a brief introduction to a large catalog of music about war, some pieces very well known. Much of this repertoire expresses the pity of war. So much of the music is in fact anti-war.

Schönberg's 6-minute cantata, *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), is one such work which came, like *Guernica*, from the composer's personal emotional connection to the events and his own sense, as a lapsed Jew, of needing to return to his roots. Schönberg wrote the narrator's text in English, saving the German language for the shouts of the sargeant. The intensity of the atonal musical vocabularly is well-suited to the intensity of the subject matter and the still remarkable orchestration that heightens the drama at every turn, from the opening screaming trumpets and tenor drum to the male chorus that stops us in our tracks when it enters near the end.

Other pieces striving to communicate the horrors of war include Penderecki's Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima written in 1960 with the composer's trademark multiple divided strings and unusual extended techniques on the instruments including instructions to play the highest note possible and to play beyond the bridge of the instrument. Penderecki has also written a Dies Irae, called the *Auchwitz Oratorio*.

The Soviets have had their own horrors to record and commemorate. In 1941 Shostakovich wrote his 7th Symphony in memory of the wartime siege of Leningrad, the same year Prokofiev was writing his epic grand opera, War and Peace, based on the Tolstoy novel, that is now a staple of the Bolshoi Opera repertory. Shostakovich again commemorated the war dead—at some personal risk—in his 13th Symphony setting the politically explosive poem of the Russian poet Yevtushenko entitled "Babi Yar." Babi Yar was a suburb northwest of Kiev where in September of 1941, Jews were ordered to assemble for supposed "resettlement." In fact what happened was that the Nazis marched them to a ravine where they systematically shot 32,000 men, women and children. Over the next two years, a total of 100,000 citizens of Kiev as well as POWs were shot there. This 13th Symphony of Shostakovich was banned by the Soviets for some years.

While some of the works mentioned rage against war and others are intended primarily as a memorial to the dead, still other responses to war embody the strenth of the enduring human spirit. Certainly the end of Schönberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* invites such interpretation when the male chorus rises up phoenix-like to sing an ancient Hebrew prayer.

But some works are in their totality spiritual in nature. Such is the case with Messiaen, himself interned in a prison camp in 1940, where he wrote his monumental *Quartet for the End of Time* under terrible conditions during a terrible time in human history. The assortment of instruments were those at hand: a cello with a missing string, an out-of-tune piano with keys that stuck, a violin and a clarinet. Yet despite the circumstances, the eight-movement work he produced is one of deep spirituality and faith, not rage, and Messiaen later said that this first audience of 5,000 prisoners was his most attentive and understanding.

In 1992 cellist Vedran Smailovic made his own courageous stand following a horrific grenade attack on people in a bread line in Sarajevo where 22 were killed. Thereafter, in full evening dress, he went to the spot at 4 pm every afternoon during the siege and played his cello at the risk of mortar attacks and machine gun fire. Deeply moved by the story, composer David Wilde wrote his piece *The Cellist of Sarajevo* played here by Yo Yo Ma. I will play just the opening two minutes, beginning with the falling half-step motive on the lowest two notes of the cello, a motif that returns again and again.

Wilde, *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (Yo Yo Ma. cello)

In 1988 when the Cold War was winding down but the Soviet Union was still intact, I was lucky to be part of a Soviet/American exchange and festival in Boston. About half a dozen Soviet composers and as many Bostonians met in private to talk and listen to each other's recordings and later to attend public performances of our music, which in my case included the Joan of Arc piece commissioned by Austin Peay two years earlier. One of the composers whose music I particularly admired was Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, a woman from Baku in Azerbaijan, a war-torn country she has since left.

In 1993 she wrote a piece for the Kronos Quartet called *Murgam Sayagi* that draws on her native musical traditions. Her response to war is not anger and not to memorialize the victims but rather to search for beauty. She says in 1992: "The Moslem world is under attack today. I quite openly want to show the cultural traditions of the Moslem people. I want people to sink into the beauty of a profound new world."

Another reaction to war, hot or cold, that we haven't mentioned yet is satire or irony, a way of making war seem absurd. This is what Scott Johnson does in his *Cold War Suite* written in 1991 to 1993 that uses the voice of I.F. Stone in a lecture given on National Public Radio in 1983 for the Ford Hall Forum. Johnson manipulates the vocal sounds and adds accompaniment of string quartet. I will play you the final one short movement from the suite, entitled The Perfect Weapon. The Perfect Weapon discusses our technological prowess and where that gets us.

Johnson, The Perfect Weapon from *Cold War Suite* (Kronos Quartet)

Whereas I have mostly played music you are not so likely to know and have simply mentioned the better known works on the topic, I would like to conclude with an excerpt from perhaps the best known of all, the Benjamin Britten *War Requiem*.

The occasion for the *War Requiem* was the rededication of Coventry Cathedral after all damage to it during the bombing of Britain had been repaired. 1961 was an unstable time: the year of the Bay of Pigs, the beginning of construction of the Berlin Wall, and the escalation of war in Vietnam. Britten, a lifelong pacifist, had previously planned works that would have presaged the War Requiem had they been written. One was to be an oratorio called Mea culpa following Hiroshima in 1945 and the other was to be about the Gandhi assasination in 1948. Neither happened. But, as Michael Steinberg says, the subject had precedent in his opera, *Peter Grimes*, in the collision of innocence with wickedness and corruption.

Britten's choice of nine poems by the eloquent war poet, Wilfred Owen, meant that recent, English-language poetry, sung by tenor and baritone, representing one English and one German soldier, and accompanied by chamber orchestra, was to be combined with the ancient liturgy of the *Requiem* which, of course, is in Latin, sung by large mixed chorus and solo soprano accompanied by full orchestra. In addition there is a boys' choir accompanied by organ, the most remote and purest sound. Britten dedicates the work to four friends who died in the war and quotes Wilfrid Owen as a preface to the music. He writes: "My subject is War, and the pity of War./The Poetry is in the pity.../All a poet can do today is to warn." Here then is the Lacrimosa for soprano, mixed chorus, and orchestra in which the drooping lines on the words of weeping and mourning remind me of Purcell.

Britten, Lacrimosa from *War Requiem*