

## Music and the United Nations

Though the United Nations quickly adopted a flag so as to distinguish its property, personnel, and actions, the question of a ‘national anthem’ has never been resolved.<sup>1</sup> The General Assembly has in principle recognized the need for an anthem, though as an anthem is no more than symbolic and has no immediate, practical purpose (unlike a flag), there has been little impetus towards the resolution of the issue. Part of the problem, indeed, is that the General Assembly has reserved for itself the right to select any prospective anthem, bringing politics into the equation.<sup>2</sup>

The question of an anthem for international institutions is not insoluble. The Council of Europe decided in 1971 to use the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as its anthem, an adoption repeated in 1985 by the heads of state of the European Council.<sup>3</sup> Europeans felt able to draw on a *shared* cultural heritage expressed by Beethoven, shorn of Schiller’s text but linked inextricably and consciously to the fraternal values it promoted. (By asking Herbert von Karajan to arrange an instrumental version of the piece, using the Romantic ideal of ‘absolute’ or purely instrumental music, the EU universalized Beethoven without politicizing him.)

The United Nations has sought in musical works associated with it to express aspects of its own manufactured identity, articulated most cogently through the UN Charter. As the product of diplomatic wrangling at San Francisco, however, the Charter is not particularly amenable to musical treatment. The first of the two pieces commissioned by the UN analyzed here directly confronted this problem. In 1971, Secretary General U Thant invited renowned cellist, composer, conductor, and peace campaigner Pablo Casals to write a ‘hymn for peace.’ Casals’s appearance at the annual

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<sup>1</sup> For the resolution adopting the UN Flag, see U.N. General Assembly, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly at its 96<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting, Lake Success, New York, 20 October 1947 (A/RES/167(II)) at <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/maplib/flag.htm> (last accessed 28 February 2011 [as all following internet links]).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/MoreInfo/guide.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/anthem/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/anthem/index_en.htm).

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United Nations Day concert in 1958 was broadcast by CBS and ‘transformed him, virtually instantaneously, into a globally recognizable symbol of peace’. This came after his long anti-fascist campaign, dating back to the Spanish Civil War, had already left him firmly in the public consciousness.<sup>4</sup> After his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year and the composition and touring of his peace oratorio ‘*El Pessebre*’, including at the UN in 1963, Casals was perhaps the perfect person to ask to write on the UN’s behalf.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, even Casals felt that the semantics of the Charter could not be set to music (unlike the rhythmical poem of Schiller for Beethoven).

The result was a commission for a text by W. H. Auden, completed within three days.<sup>6</sup> Abstract and more of a paean to music’s qualities than to humankind’s peaceful tendencies, it neither slips off the tongue nor stays in the memory.<sup>7</sup> Casals orchestrated the piece in his usual lush neo-Romantic style, but although the music seems to flow when heard instrumentally, it is very difficult to sing with any sense of music and text connecting.<sup>8</sup> It was premiered on 24 October, United Nations Day.<sup>9</sup> The first problem, however, was that Casals’s humanism and the respect shown for him dominated the concert. After the Second World War, Casals had refused to play solo in any country which recognized the government of General Franco: he made one slight exception

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<sup>4</sup> For details of Casals’s life, see Robert Baldock, *Pablo Casals* (Boston: 1992, Northeastern University Press), quotation at p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> The nominating committee of the Nobel Prize called him ‘une lumière irremplaçable dans la lutte de notre humanité’. See *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>7</sup> The text, entitled ‘A Hymn to the UN’, runs as follows: ‘Eagerly, musician, / Sweep your string, / So we may sing. / Elated, optative, / Our several voices / Interblending, / Playfully contending, / Not interfering / But co-inhering, / For all within / The cincture / of the sound, / Is holy ground / Where all are brothers, / None faceless Others, / et mortals beware / Of words, for / With words we lie, / Can say peace / When we mean war, / Foul thought speak fair / And promise falsely, / But song is true: / Let music for peace / Be the paradigm, / For peace means to change / At the right time, / as the World-Clock / Goes Tick and Tock. / So may the story / of our human city / Presently move / Like music, when / Begotten notes / New notes beget / Making the flowing / Of time a-growing / Till what it could be, / At last it is, / Where even sadness / Is a form of gladness, / Where fate is freedom, / Grace and Surprise.’ See [www.un.org/geninfo/faq/factsheets/hymn.pdf](http://www.un.org/geninfo/faq/factsheets/hymn.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> For the choral and piano score, see ‘Items-in-Secretary-General’s Statements’, 7/1/1976, S-0985-0006-05-00001 at <http://archives-trim.un.org/webdrawer/rec/423078/>, pp. 41-55.

<sup>9</sup> A performance of the piece, without choir, can be heard at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpY-tER9je4&feature=related>.

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when he played for President Kennedy in 1961. After the performance of his ‘anthem’, Casals, aged 94, was handed his cello and announced, ‘I *have* to play today’.

Herein lay the second problem, for Casals chose to play the piece with which he, the world’s most famous cellist, was most renowned. ‘*El Cant dels Ocells*’ (‘The Song of the Birds’) had been turned by him into a song of Catalan nationalism. Speaking to the General Assembly before his encore, Casals declared, ‘I am a Catalan’. Proceeding to connect Catalan nationalism with both parliamentarianism and pacifism, Casals linked politics and the universalism of ‘absolute’ music:

Birds sing when they are in the sky, they sing: “Peace, peace, peace,” and it is a melody that Bach, Beethoven and all the greats would have admired and loved. What is more, it is born in the soul of my people, Catalonia.

Casals thus hocked the UN’s promises of peace and self-determination to his performance. However, as it was Franco’s regime represented in the UN and not the Catalans, political pressure based on the rights of sovereign states, as well as the end of U Thant’s stint as Secretary-General, led to the sidelining of Casals’s anthem.<sup>10</sup>

Auden’s former friend Benjamin Britten’s attempt to write for the UN sank not politically, but on the rocks of musical quality. Britten, like Casals, was a noted pacifist: his status as a conscientious objector had forced him and his partner Peter Pears to emigrate to the USA during World War II.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even before the war Britten had already developed an intrinsic style which he used for avowedly pacifist works (including the *War Requiem*).<sup>12</sup> Pacifism was a ‘basic preoccupation to Britten’s creativity,’ and in his works we arguably find ‘a constant indictment (and, not infrequently, analysis) of violence and its consequences’.

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<sup>10</sup> The sound recording of Casals’s speech and performance of ‘*El Cant des Ocells*’ can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt9iz3xApVg&feature=related>.

<sup>11</sup> For biographies of Britten, see Michael Kennedy, *Britten*, (London: 1981, J. M. Dent), Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: 2008, Phaidon), and Donald Mitchell, ‘Britten, (Edward) Benjamin, Baron Britten (1913–1976)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30853>.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Mitchell, ‘Violent Climaxes’, in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, (Cambridge: 1999, Cambridge University Press), pp. 188-214.

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Seven years before his invitation to Casals, U Thant asked Britten to compose a piece for the UN's twentieth birthday: though it was necessarily symbolic for the UN's ideals, it was in no way supposed to be an anthem.<sup>13</sup> Though E. M. Forster was an early collaborator, the text was almost entirely of Britten's compilation: it features quotations of Blake, Virgil, Tennyson, Shelley, Lao Tzu, and even Jesus Christ, before a second part constructed of Virgil's fourth *'Eclogue'*.<sup>14</sup> Set for adults' and children's choirs, the words of *'Voices for Today'* all riff on the theme of peace. One taken from Camus, for instance, reminds the audience that 'the fruits of the spirit are slower to ripen than intercontinental missiles'; another, from Hölderlin, exhorts it to 'silence the raging battle with Heaven's melodies of peace'. The piece received the unique honor of a triple world premiere, with concurrent performances taking place in London and Paris.<sup>15</sup> On the bill at UN Headquarters, it was pointedly joined by Shostakovich's untypically jolly Ninth Symphony (written in Leningrad partly in celebration of the end of World War II), the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth, and one of the three overtures to *'Leonore'* (the opera in which, with the title *'Fidelio'*, Beethoven wrote an even blunter paean to freedom than in the Ninth).

In his dedicatory address broadcast to all three audiences and around the world, U Thant said that

To him [Britten], the ideal of peace is a matter of personal and abiding concern. At the head of an earlier composition (also about war and peace) he once wrote this stark preamble: "All the artist can do..... is warn". Today, Benjamin Britten speaks for all of us, with an eloquence we lack, in a medium of which he is master... May the *'Voices for Today'* which we hear in these halls from now on be voices which proclaim with new vigour the determination of Governments and peoples to attain our goals of lasting peace.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See the archival notes of the Britten-Pears Foundation at <http://www.brittenpears.org/?id=320&page=research/catalogue/detail.html>.

<sup>14</sup> For the programme of the United Nations Day Concert at which the piece was premiered, including the text, see S-0885-0006-01-00001 at <http://archives-trim.un.org/webdrawer/rec/422981/>, pp. 105-114.

<sup>15</sup> A photograph of the composer with the score in London can be found at <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/2672429/Hulton-Archive?Language=en-US>.

<sup>16</sup> 'Address by the Secretary-General at United Nations Day Concert', 24 October 1965, S-0885-0006-01-00001 at <http://archives-trim.un.org/webdrawer/rec/422981/>, pp. 115-117.

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If only. Britten's biographer, Michael Kennedy, wrote that the piece had little 'chance of outliving the friendly occasion which engendered it', as the music was 'mechanical, though obviously sincere' response to 'highminded sentiments'.<sup>17</sup> Around twelve minutes long, the piece was no more warmly welcomed at the time. Theodore Strongin in the *New York Times* wrote that it was 'bland,' 'a total loss,' and, as if for good measure, 'none too easy to understand, either, though at times it rose to fervent climaxes.' Remarkably, Strongin thought the music 'too simple-minded in style to match the profound, imaginative text.'<sup>18</sup>

Despite being 'touched' by his involvement 'in such a great occasion', Britten's music failed to live up to it.<sup>19</sup> The piece has rarely been heard since. Nor, indeed, has its immediate successor as an anniversary piece, Krzysztof Penderecki's '*Cosmogony*', composed for the UN's twenty-fifth birthday concert in 1970. Like the Casals, the earliest contender in the stillborn race to become the UN's anthem, Shostakovich's '*United Nations March*', was crippled by its political ancestry. First written as Soviet film music, then adapted for an American film called '*Thousands Cheer*' which celebrated the forthcoming victory of the Allies (the original 'United Nations'), the march was arranged by Leopold Stokowski and even sung in New York public schools before becoming embroiled in the Cold War.

All these examples show the difficulties of music written for the UN. With no shared culture or organizational identity easily to draw upon, and with the inherent political connotations that might attach to any composition, it is little surprise that it is still without an anthem.

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<sup>17</sup> Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> 'A Britten Premiere Performed at U.N. Marks 20<sup>th</sup> Year', *New York Times*, 25 October 1965, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Telegram from Britten to U Thant, 25 October 1965, S-0885-0006-01-00001 at <http://archives-trim.un.org/webdrawer/rec/422981/>, p. 104.