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Citation: Grant, P. (2020). Classical to Dub Reggae: The First World War and Musical Memory. In: Gilbert, C., McLoughlin, K. & Munro, N. (Eds.), *On Commemoration: Global Reflections upon Remembering War*. (pp. 265-269). Oxford: Peter Lang. ISBN 9781788747325

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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Classical to Dub-Reggae: The First World War and Musical Memory

Peter Grant

Scholars such as John Sloboda, Ben Anderson and Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley have demonstrated that the most valued outcome people place on listening to music is the remembrance of past events.¹ With an event as universal and traumatic as the First World War this value is even greater.

The nature of who is remembering what has changed over 100 years as those with first-hand experience of the period have died. Take for example two pieces written in the War's immediate aftermath. Arthur Bliss's choral work *Morning Heroes* is a deeply personal tribute to lost comrades, most notably his own brother. It was the first work to set one of Wilfred Owen's poems to music: 'Spring Offensive' appears alongside passages from the *Iliad*, Walt Whitman's 'Drum Taps', verse by the eighth-century Chinese poet Li Bai and Robert Nichols' 'Dawn on the Somme'. Its use of heroic Homeric verse has made it deeply unfashionable. Havergal Brian's surrealist comedy opera *The Tigers*, though conforming to the irony Paul Fussell diagnosed as characterising the conflict in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), should be far better known and is crying out for a première production. In the 1920s Bliss was in tune with current remembrance practice and Brian out of tune. Today the position is reversed and in the early 21st century Bliss's romanticism and ideas of beauty can sound inappropriate and outdated. Yet the persistence of more traditional forms is understandable in the sense that they offered the comfort of familiarity. It is telling that Bliss and Ralph Vaughan Williams (in *A Pastoral Symphony*), both of them war veterans, utilised a pastoral mode in their work rather than turning to more modernist forms.

This leads us to ask the question: what approach to war should a commemorative piece of music take? I have been significantly disappointed by the majority of 'classical' music composed for the First World War Centenaries as it is stuck firmly within both the British myth

of 'blood, mud and futility' and the more recent concept that all soldiers are victims. The latter seems to me to deny them their individuality and imposes a universality on a far more complex set of experiences. The former, by emphasising the specifically British interpretation of the War, fails to address transnational issues and to interpret the War as a global conflict – in exactly the same way as British myths of the Second World War.

Somewhat facetiously, I put much of the blame here on Benjamin Britten. Until Britten's *War Requiem* of 1961-2, Wilfred Owen was, notwithstanding W.B. Yeats' comment that passive suffering was not a theme for poetry, a respected poet but hardly a household name. His status was transformed in the 1960s until he became the second most studied English writer in British schools after Shakespeare, achieving canonical status, at least in Britain. Don't misunderstand me. Both the *War Requiem* and Owen's poetry are among the greatest achievements in British art of the twentieth century, but what happened was that Owen became defined by a small fraction of his literary output and his work became indivisibly attached to a particular myth of the First World War as a unique conflict that epitomised the futile slaughter of millions of innocent young men. Though the *War Requiem* itself came before the majority of the 1960s cultural works that cemented the popular view of the War, it did represent a more modern interpretation of Owen. However its 'message' is clearly one of universal abhorrence of war rather than being a specific critique of 1914-18, yet that is not usually how it is viewed.

Whilst a great deal of the popular music about the First World War composed over the last 50 years is also strongly mythic, there are some examples that attempt to shake off the shackles. Somewhat counter-intuitively, several pop and rock artists' works are more complex in their treatment than much longer 'serious' pieces. They certainly don't glorify the First World War but what they do suggest is that, for some, it was liberating rather than destructive and that wars can bring out the best as well as the worst in people.

It is interesting that several of these ‘myth busting’ artists are women or have prominent female band members. They include Portland indie band the Decemberists; the extraordinary Diamanda Galas, who is an American of Anatolian and Greek extraction; the British all-female electronic rock band Electrelane and, perhaps most prominently, PJ Harvey, whose *Let England Shake* is one of the few examples of rock music that is able to mirror the complexity of war.

The Decemberists ‘The Soldiering Life’ (2003) is a homoerotic love song set in the trenches that has many parallels to Owen’s poetry, especially to ‘It Was a Navy Boy’. It is a ground-breaking song that updates some of themes of Owen’s poetry. It is also about the only popular song that has the temerity to suggest that, for some, the War was actually fun, opening up new emotional experiences.

Diamanda Galás has been described as ‘capable of the most unnerving vocal terror’, with her three-and-a-half octave vocal range. Her album *Defixiones, Will and Testament: Orders from the Dead* (2003) is a concept album about the Armenian and Greek genocides. The centrepiece is ‘Orders from the Dead’ an 11-minute ‘sound-poem’ of war, murder and anger composed by Galás but based on Armenian poet Siamanto’s ‘The Dance’. Siamanto (real name Atom Yarjanian), who died in the genocide, wrote the poem in 1910 and it is a graphic depiction of a massacre of young Armenian women forced to dance naked and then burned to death by Turkish soldiers.

Perhaps the most extraordinary updating of First World War poetry in popular music is ‘The Valleys’ (2004) by the all-female alternative rock band Electrelane. It is adapted from Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘A Letter Home’, written in May 1916 following the death of the man he loved, David Thomas. The poem is one that somewhat dispels Sassoon’s caricature as a disillusioned didact as he indulges in pastoral images that would not be out of place in Andrew Marvell and are very much in the same mould as Bliss’s music. Writer Verity Susman

composed the song following the death of a close friend ‘as an expression of feelings about loss and memory, not linked particularly to WW1 or indeed any other war’.² The two themes that are emphasised are love and remembrance, the latter strengthened by the use of a choir, strongly reminiscent of liturgical connections through hymns and requiems. Susman’s adaptation perfectly fits the pastoral approach of Sassoon whilst simultaneously transforming poetry into song. It is a staggering artistic achievement by a group which has received little recognition.

Let England Shake (2011) was a milestone in the history of popular music in the way it was received as a serious commentary on both war and England’s military past. It was greeted with virtually unanimous acclaim in the music press, named ‘album of the year’ by 16 publications and went on to win the prestigious Mercury Prize, making Harvey the first person to have won the award twice. Among Harvey’s influences were the work of Harold Pinter, the poetry of T. S. Eliot, the paintings of Salvador Dalí and Francisco Goya as well as music by The Doors, Velvet Underground and The Pogues. Harvey also has a long-standing admiration for Wilfred Owen. *Let England Shake* memorably links the motivations behind and emotions within British conflicts of the last 100 years, yet also evokes a positive picture of England (and by association Australia and New Zealand) and a lingering pride in the country’s military achievements whilst questioning the roles of memory and remembrance.

Though not involving any female musicians I would also like to direct readers to perhaps the most multi-cultural product of the interface between the First World War and contemporary popular music. *Empire Soldiers* is a 2-CD release from 2013 with a live version recorded in 2015 whose theme is that of the experience of Anglo-Caribbean and Franco-African soldiers and labourers. The main contributors are Steve Vibronics (real name Steve Gibbs, who is white and British) and Martin Nathan (white, French), one of the founders of the French dub scene who records under the title Brain Damage. For the *Empire Soldiers* project

they were joined by several lyricists/singers. Key contributors were African/Caribbean historian and poet Madu Messenger; British-born musician and DJ M. Parvez, who has Pakistani roots; Sir Jean who is Senegalese; and French-Moroccan poet Mohammed el Amraoui. Their common language is dub-reggae and the music also has some touches of modern electronica. *Empire Soldiers* is a 'myth-busting' album on many fronts and one of the positive outcomes of the War's centenary has certainly been the greater recognition of the participation in it by non-white soldiers in the allied armies.

With all the great music being produced by popular musicians in many genres, from indie rock to extreme metal via dub reggae and electronica, it really was extraordinarily short-sighted that the BBC's music-related centenary project was to commission 50 new pieces from folk musicians only. Don't get me wrong: there are some great folk and folk-rock songs about the war but what the BBC was doing was looking back instead of forwards.

What I would suggest is that what these more radical works I've mentioned are doing is rejecting our current over-sentimental and mythologized approach to remembrance and instead giving the dead, in all their multi-faceted complexity, a contemporary voice.

Tracks to explore:

The Decemberists 'The Soldiering Life'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a99SmtndbUQ>

Diamanda Galas (with Rotting Christ) 'Orders from the Dead'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7ZmK6DKDs8>

Electrelane 'The Valleys' (based on Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'A Letter Home')
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtbjvQbLd6s>

PJ Harvey 'Let England Shake' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u75Qtit-lng> (this is a performance of the entire album)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3_ihmaMu2s

¹ John Sloboda, ‘Everyday Uses of Music Listening: A Preliminary Survey’, *Music, Mind and Science*, ed. Suk Won Yi (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1999); Ben Anderson, ‘Recorded Music and Practices of Remembering’, *Social and Cultural Geography* 5.1 (March 2004), 3-20; Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, *Photography, Music and Memory: Pieces of the Past in Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

² Correspondence with the author.