

Also today: Benjamin Britten's 100th birthday

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

November 22, 2013

It's a big day for historical anniversaries. Fifty years ago today, both C. S. Lewis and Aldous Huxley died. Both were overshadowed by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas the same day. I appreciate [Ralph Wood's *Century* article on Lewis](#) and [E. J. Dionne's column on JFK](#), along with [Jimmy Breslin's classic story about the surgeon](#) who tried to save the president while the first lady stood stoically by.

Yet while my life and mind have been shaped by both American evangelicalism and political liberalism, I feel little personal connection to either Lewis or Kennedy. Like a lot of people, I have mixed feelings about both men; perhaps more importantly, I wasn't around yet when they died. In any case, neither anniversary made me catch my breath this week.

Here's what did: Benjamin Britten's 100th birthday. The British composer wrote ambitious, tuneful, fiercely modern music—and he did profound things when he worked with text. I was recently part of a discussion group asked to go around the room and describe a formative musical experience in our lives. I spent about five seconds wondering how I could possibly choose just one; then I thought of it and immediately stopped listening to everyone else and just sat there, remembering it.

It was my senior year at Wheaton, and for once I wasn't stuck in a classroom talking about C. S. Lewis. [Alum John Nelson](#) led the combined conservatory ensembles in a performance of Britten's *War Requiem*, and I was in the tenor section.

It's an astonishing piece of music. The choir, children's choir and soprano soloist sing liturgical texts from the requiem mass; the tenor and baritone soloists sing the poetry of World War I soldier Wilfred Owen. Traditional words of worship collide with startling words about the ugliness that exists in the real world—a juxtaposition I hadn't experienced before. I began to learn something new about the potential for beautiful worship to embody not only profound creativity but fierce protest and heartbreaking lament.

Here's Robert Shaw conducting the *Dies Irae*, the *War Requiem*'s longest and most memorable movement, with its bugle calls and 7/4 time:

And here's the somewhat less accessible *Agnus Dei*, in which "the sins of the world" are no mere abstraction:

Marin Alsop, [the first *maestra* to lead a major U.S. orchestra](#), remembers the *War Requiem* [here](#). Elsewhere—pretty much everywhere elsewhere, in fact—young people around the world are participating in this afternoon's ambitious go at one of the largest-scale coordinated singing projects ever: [a 640-choir take on Britten's *Friday Afternoons*](#). His work isn't easy, but it's greatly beloved.