

“Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles...”
20th Century Music as Teaching Strategy for the *Iliad*

If, as Congreve’s aphorism goes, “music hath charms to soothe the savage breast,” it surely has as well the capacity to aid teachers seeking fresh ways to mediate Homeric epic to the ear-budded i-students in today’s classroom. Admittedly, these students are not typically downloading English choral music from iTunes, but in this paper I shall suggest that even music not on most playlists can open up new windows from which to behold the splendor of the *Iliad*. I shall draw the audience’s attention primarily to three passages: Hektor’s tender farewell to his wife and infant son in Book 6; the emotional aftermath of Patroklos’ death which we witness in Book 18; and Achilles’ run-in with the river Scamander in Book 21. In correspondence to these excerpts of the poem I shall introduce, respectively, Arthur Bliss’s *Morning Heroes*, Michael Tippett’s *Songs for Achilles*, and Wayne Siegel’s *Burning River*. In the first movement of his piece, Bliss sets lengthy extracts from Hektor’s farewell speech to Andromache; the second of Tippett’s *Songs* turns Homer’s laconic description of Achilles’ war-cry from the rampart into a stark, musical *cri de coeur*; Siegel’s electro-acoustic piece evokes the dissonance of bloody warfare as Achilles chokes the river with Troy’s dead.

My point will not be that we should expect or wish our students to like, or not like, any of these pieces; indeed, I have rarely seen a student *not* blanch at Tippett’s musical ululation. In fact, that is the very point: I want to suggest that, quite apart from liking the music, students can appreciate these pieces as legitimate receptions of the Homeric poem, and also come to a new understanding of the episodes in the *Iliad* through them. It is always stimulating to invite young readers of the *Iliad* to consider its attitude toward warfare, yet never more so than through the music of Bliss and Tippett, the first a decorated but psychologically wounded survivor of the WWI trenches, the second a conscientious objector imprisoned for his views in WWII. Just as

piquant a contrast is effected by juxtaposing Bliss and Siegel: both use a narrator to declaim Homeric text, but the latter intentionally distorts the reading to the point of incomprehensibility to reflect the sonic horror of war, while the former foregrounds the text by way of personal catharsis. Far from replacing a close reading of the text itself, the music complements it, as we contemplate the cuts made by Bliss, Tippett's own take on Homer, or Siegel's decision to make the spoken Greek just one aspect of a bleak soundscape. In every case, students must reckon with the eternal vitality of the story and Homer's telling of it. Homer bade the Muse sing; these songs, so diverse in sound and provenance, invite students to hear her still, two and a half millennia later.