This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before."

These are the words of conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein from 50 years ago, responding to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

After tragic events, great music has a way of healing and renewing audiences with a power and directness unsurpassed by other arts. And as the nation enters the second week after the violence in Boston, Bernstein's words seem especially poignant. It was not surprising to learn that this quote circulated rapidly among musicians after the bombing of the marathon.

Bernstein's words came to me from John and Cheryl Anderson, who have teamed up for a large-scale presentation of a musical masterpiece that serves as an ideal response to the Boston tragedy. These two superb local conductors and music educators have been preparing the choral work that England's Benjamin Britten composed 50 years ago to help heal a nation devastated by bombing — his "War Requiem."

Britten's Requiem — to be performed at Sunset Center this Saturday evening — was commissioned for the re-dedication of the Coventry Cathedral in London, which had been destroyed by German bombs in World War II. Not only is this choral masterwork compellingly appropriate for this moment in our collective circumstance, but it marks the premiere performance of the Requiem in this region. It also commemorates the 100th anniversary of the composer's birth.

This ambitious undertaking serves as the season finale of Ensemble Monterey Chamber Orchestra in collaboration with the Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus, Cantiamo!, Cabrillo Chorale and the Cabrillo Youth Chorus. In addition to the Sunset Center performance Saturday evening at 8, the Requiem will be presented in Aptos Sunday at the Cabrillo College Crocker Theater at 7p.m.

John Anderson, who leads the combined ensembles in the Requiem this weekend, says he fell in love with Britten's music when he conducted the composer's "Serenade for Horn, Tenor and Strings," a work he has presented a number of times and expects to conduct again.

"Britten to me has the ability to combine the eternal and the spiritual directly with the mundane, with day-to-day existence," he said. "I first discovered this with the serenade. and this quality is a hundred times more evident in the 'War Requiem.'"

The Requiem juxtaposes the Latin Mass for the dead with the verse of poet-soldier Wilfred Owen, who died in World War I. A conversation between an English soldier and a German soldier, the composition reveals the true human victory of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. Hailed as a mighty triumph when it was first performed, the "Britten Requiem" takes its place as a great 20th century masterpiece with a profound message.

Scored for soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, chorus, boys' choir, organ, and orchestra, the Requiem has been transcribed for 22 instruments by composer and musician Steve Tosh for Ensemble Monterey's small orchestra.

Along with the choral ensembles prepared by choral director Cheryl Anderson, distinguished featured soloists include tenor Jacob Williams, baritone John Orduña and sopranos Tanaya Harris and Erykka Ximore.

You can be sure the musical artists of the Anderson's ensembles will strive to make music for us more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever at this time of collective heartbreak.

For tickets to the Carmel Sunset performance this Saturday call 620-2048 or see www.ensemblemonterey.org. John Anderson will give a talk about the performance at 7p.m.