

ABOUT THE MUSIC

*He has come: a young man over whose cradle
Graces and Heroes have stood watch. . . .
Should Brahms direct his magic wand where
the powers of the masses in chorus and orchestra
may lend him their strength, we may look
forward to even more wondrous glimpses of the
secret world of spirits.*

—Robert Schumann, 1853

Schumann's rhapsodic response to the 20-year old Johannes Brahms surely ranks as one of the great introductions in the lives of the composers. But as much as these words did to launch his career, Brahms would forever wrestle with the burden of being cast as the Savior of German music. With the premiere of the *German Requiem* in 1868, the public began to see Schumann's prophecy fulfilled.

The years leading up to the *Requiem* were pivotal for Brahms. His gift for composition continued to develop, mostly through his piano and chamber works (described by Schumann as "veiled symphonies"), with important contributions to the choral repertoire as well. Schumann's insanity and suicide attempt in early 1854, a profound personal tragedy for Brahms as well as for his mentor's young family, also marked the start of Brahms's most important lifelong personal relationship: his unconsummated (and, at times, stormy) partnership with Clara Schumann. Until the time of Schumann's death in 1856, and during Clara's decades of widowhood, Brahms would become a mainstay of her family,

a financial provider and, in his own awkward and fitful way, her soulmate.

This same period included three of the four professional posts Brahms was to occupy in his long career—notably, all of them music directorships of non-professional choruses. As music director to the small princely court at Detmold (1857–1859), Brahms programmed a number of works by Renaissance composers. There is evidence of a reading of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* by the Detmold singers under Brahms's direction, though not a performance. From 1862 to 1863, soon after his permanent move to Vienna, Brahms served as music director of the Vienna *Singverein*, again bringing the works of the early masters before a larger public, to varying degrees of success.

It was his founding and leadership of the Hamburg *Frauenchor* (1859–1862) that was perhaps nearest to Brahms's heart, and most important to his lifelong study of the works of the Renaissance and early Baroque periods. The concept of a women's chorus that gave public performances to high artistic standards was, for the times, pioneering in its own right, and of a piece with Brahms's own egalitarian world view. During his time with the women of the *Frauenchor*, Brahms explored the works of Bach, Handel, Byrd, Hassler, Isaac, and Palestrina, and composed for their voices a series of original works in the same musical vein—still staples of the women's chorus repertoire.

Brahms's 20s and early 30s were not without tribulation. The trauma of



Brahms in his thirties around the time of the Requiem.

Schumann's death was followed in 1859 by the dispiriting public reception of the *First Piano Concerto* (Op. 15), his first work for large forces. Although his chamber works garnered increasing acclaim, a major public success proved elusive. The broader public stage afforded by Vienna added to the pressure of having been held out as Beethoven's heir: "You don't know what it's like for the likes of us to hear that giant's footsteps marching behind," wrote Brahms to a friend. Soon after the death of his mother, in 1865, the composer finally set about the work that was to bring the public success he (and the music world) had been waiting for.

The *Requiem* was composed over the winter-spring months of 1866, and finished during Brahms's summer vacation later that year. The slow movement of an early (1854) two-piano sonata sketch was pressed into service for the second movement, but the rest of the work was entirely

new. After a disastrously under-rehearsed presentation of the first three movements in Vienna, in December, 1867, Brahms turned the work over to Karl Reinthaler, music director of the Protestant cathedral in Bremen, who commandeered all of the town's musical forces to the service of preparing it through the winter months. On Good Friday, April 10, 1868, Brahms strode into the packed cathedral, with Clara Schumann on his arm and his father—and virtually the entire German music establishment (including the ladies of the nearby *Frauenchor*)—in attendance, to lead a choir of 200 voices and large orchestra in a performance that proved his mettle as a symphonic composer, and claimed for the *Requiem* an enduring place in listeners' hearts.

The immediate appeal and lasting success of the *Requiem* have as much to do with the world view it expresses as its consummate artistic craftsmanship. It is not a Mass for the Dead in any conventional sense. Through its careful selection and arrangement of Biblical texts—called by the Brahms scholar Michael Musgrave a "significant creative achievement in its own right," the balance and symmetry of its musical structure, and the warmth and lyricism that shines through its every page, the work instead speaks universally, and personally, to the living listener. It is a poetic response to the important role death plays in life—as a point of reflection and renewal, and as a reminder of the healing capacity of the human heart. Indeed, Brahms remarked to Reinthaler about the work's title, "I confess that I would gladly omit even the word *German* and instead use *Human*."

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Brahms's own faith, which he did not formally practice beyond young adulthood, was unadorned, humanist, and informed by a deep acquaintance with the Lutheran Bible—a sacred text that by all accounts he received as wisdom rather than revelation. As Musgrave rightly observes, it is Brahms's knowledge of scripture "which imparts to the text of the *Requiem* its great power and focus. . . . Several ideas [are] constantly in play. The deep unity resulting from the recurrence and variation of the textual themes of the *Requiem* is given vital focus by the use of symmetry" in its musical construction.

The passages Brahms drew from the II books of the Old Testament, New Testament, and Apocrypha are also "as interesting for what they omit as what they include. He focuses on comfort, hope, reassurance, and reward for personal effort, conspicuously avoiding judgment, vengeance, religious symbols and—above all—the sacrifice of Christ for human sin." While the work lacks any words *about* Jesus, it twice makes prominent use of words spoken *by* Jesus (given in bold face in the translations that follow these program notes)—in the Sermon on the Mount and in farewell to his disciples—that unite all listeners around important themes.

Brahms once wrote to Clara that "art is a republic." This outlook, honed in the volunteer groups he inspired and worked with from an early age, and practiced through his own intense dedication to the craft of music-making, is reflected in the *Requiem*. For Brahms, art was collaborative, communicative, personal, rather

than hierarchical, polemical, self-aggrandizing. Biographer Jan Swafford reminds us that Brahms's music, "which unites magisterial perfection with lyrical warmth, a monumental style with whispering intimacy," reaches something that already lies "in the hearts of listeners everywhere." The essential ingredients of Brahms's style—fluidity, a profound inner logic, a gift for structure not lacking in expressiveness, and an overwhelming sincerity—have guaranteed the staying power of his work. The *Requiem* is a living example of the composer's continued relevance: In the words of Brahms's friend and critic, Eduard Hanslick, "like a deep well, the longer we gaze into it, the more brightly the stars shine back."

—John Maclay

I. Ziemlich langsam und mit Ausdruck

The first in Brahms's sequence of meditations is a movement of "immense subtlety wrapped in noble simplicity." Two major themes that echo through the *Requiem*, establishing a musical pattern of recurrence to match the recurring textual themes, are introduced: First, a stepwise "chorale" theme (taken up by the violas in the third measure) and second, a rising theme on the word *selig* ("blessed") at the first choral entrance. Brahms sets the opening words from the Sermon on the Mount without accompaniment, lending them an almost mystical character, redolent of the early works of the Renaissance composers. The orchestra, lacking the brilliant sound of the violins, is treated at times as a double chorus, trading musical material with the choir. The harp, which continues into the second movement and returns at the end of the *Requiem*, adds a touch of ancient warmth. The text speaks of sowing and reaping—here, the literal planting of grief, of doing something productive with it, to be rewarded by joy and remembrance. It is a striking and beautiful image.

**Selig sind, die da Leid tragen, denn
sie sollen getröstet werden.**

*Blessed are they who mourn, for they
shall be comforted.*

Matthew 5:4

Die mit Tränen säen, werden mit
Freuden ernten. Sie gehen hin und
weinen und tragen edlen Samen und
kommen mit Freuden und bringen
ihre Garben.

*They who sow with tears, will reap with joy.
They who go forth and weep, carrying precious
seed, shall return with joy and bring their sheaves
with them.*

Psalms 126:5–6

II. Langsam, marschmässig – Etwas bewegter – Un poco sostenuto – Allegro non troppo

The second movement flows from the first musically, textually and logically. The full "chorale" theme (an old Lutheran hymn tune, in its original, minor key) is declaimed by the choir against a "funeral sarabande [that] evokes the Gothic severity of Schütz." Originally written as part of a two-piano sonata in 1854, in a direct response to Schumann's first suicide attempt, it is symphonic in conception. The text continues the sower/reaper imagery from the first movement—the cyclicity of nature, the patient tending of crops—to illustrate the rhythms of life, death and renewal. A pivotal moment arrives on the text "But the Lord's word endures forever," dramatized by a thrilling transition from minor to major. The fugato section that follows dissolves into cross-rhythm at one point, an ecstatic musical response to the rapturous text:

Jan Swafford identifies this as a signature characteristic of Brahms's work, a "highly expressive device" wherein "moments of wrenching intensity are created partly by uprooting the pulse." A lengthy denouement balances the weight of the movement's opening section.

Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras, und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen wie des Grases Blumen. Das Gras ist verdorret und die Blume abgefallen.

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of mankind as the flower of grass. The grass has withered and the flower has fallen away.
I Peter 1:24

So seid nun geduldig, lieben Brüder, bis auf die Zukunft des Herrn.

Therefore be patient, dear brothers, until the coming of the Lord.

Siehe, ein Ackermann wartet auf die köstliche Frucht der Erde und ist geduldig darüber, bis er empfahe den Morgenregen und Abendregen. So sei geduldig.

Behold, a farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient for it, until he receive the morning rain and evening rain. Therefore be patient.
James 5:7–8

Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras etc.

For all flesh is as grass etc.

Aber des Herrn Wort bleibet in Ewigkeit.

But the Lord's word endures forever.
I Peter 1:25

Die Erlöseten des Herrn werden wiederkommen, und gen Zion kommen mit Jauchzen; ewige Freude wird über ihrem Haupte sein; Freude und Wonne werden sie ergreifen, und Schmerz und Seufzen wird weg müssen.

The redeemed of the Lord will return, and come to Zion with loud rejoicing; everlasting joy will be upon their heads; they will know joy and rapture, and pain and sighing will be cast away.
Isaiah 35:10

III. Andante moderato

Like the second movement, the third is organized around a lengthy transition from minor to major, as anxiety gives way to reassurance. With its fits, starts and blind alleys, the opening section of the movement recalls the "Representation of Chaos" from Haydn's *Creation*, a depiction of formlessness that conveys mankind's insignificance in relation to the cosmos. As is the case later in the work, the baritone soloist trades lines with the choir, one man spurring reflection by the larger group and, by implication, the assembled listeners. Agitation increases on the text, "Now, Lord, how shall I comfort myself?"—leaving us suspended (harmonically) in mid-air. Certainty and security arrive after a massive cadence, resolving to a pedal tone in the bass instruments and organ that depicts the hand of God. This massive ground bass, sustained for a full thirty-six measures, was one of the controversial features of the work, and the task of orchestrating it bedeviled Brahms. In the partial 1867 Vienna performance, the

timpanist misread Brahms's dynamic indication at the beginning of the fugue as *ff* (fortissimo) instead of *fp* (forte, then piano for the duration), banging out triplets at full volume for page after page. The critic Eduard Hanslick wrote that "one experienced the sensations of a passenger rattling through a tunnel in an express train." Properly rendered, the great D pedal is a steady hum that allows the skirling double fugue above it to be heard in all its glory.

Herr, lehre doch mich, dass ein Ende mit mir haben muss und mein Leben ein Ziel hat und ich davon muss. Siehe, meine Tage sind einer Hand breit vor dir, und mein Leben ist wie nichts vor dir.

Lord, teach me that I must have an end, and that my life has a span, and that I must depart. See, my days are one hand's breadth to you, and my life is as nothing to you.

Ach, wie gar nichts sind alle Menschen, die doch so sicher leben. Sie gehen daher wie ein Schemen und machen ihnen viel vergebliche Unruhe; sie sammeln und wissen nicht, wer es krigen wird. Nun, Herr, wes soll ich mich trösten? Ich hoffe auf dich.

Ah, how insignificant are all men, and yet they live with so much certainty. They go about like a shadow and often trouble themselves in vain; they heap up riches and know not who will get them. Now, Lord, how shall I comfort myself? I hope in you.

Psalm 39:4–7

Der Gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes Hand, und keine Qual rühret sie an.

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there no torment shall touch them.
Wisdom of Solomon 3:1

IV. Mässig bewegt

This most beloved movement of the *Requiem* shows Brahms's increasing skill at orchestration. Transparent instrumental textures seem effortlessly interwoven with the voices, bringing to light a gentle vision of heaven that is based more on wonderment than awe. The composer's penchant for rhythmic devices is evident in a lengthy hemiola (recasting two measures of three into three measures of two) on the text "die loben dich immerdar," a technique, drawn from earlier musical forms, that heightens the meaning of the phrase.

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen, Herr Zebaoth! Meine Seele verlangt und sehnet sich nach den Vorhöfen des Herrn; mein Leib und Seele freuen sich in dem lebendigen Gott. Wohl denen, die in deinem Hause wohnen, die loben dich immerdar.

How lovely are thy dwelling places, Lord of Hosts! My soul longs and yearns for the forecourts of the Lord; my body and soul delight themselves in the living God. Blessed are they who live in your house: they praise you forever.

Psalm 84:1–2, 4

V. Langsam

This lullaby for soprano soloist, chorus and orchestra was composed after the *Requiem*'s premiere in 1868 and included in the first published version of the work in 1869.

It is hard to see it as anything but a remembrance of Brahms's own mother, even as it calls to mind the more universal concepts of return, remembrance of loved ones and rest from one's labors. The chorus provides a rocking, gentle commentary to one of the most beautiful (and difficult) solo vocal lines Brahms ever wrote.

**Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit: aber ich
will euch wiedersehen und euer Herz
soll sich freuen, und euer Freude
soll niemand von euch nehmen.**

*You now have sorrow; but I will see you
again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your
joy no one shall take from you.*

John 16:22

Sehet mich an: Ich habe eine kleine
Zeit Mühe und Arbeit gehabt und
habe grossen Trost funden.

*Look on me: I have, for a little time, had trouble
and labor, but have found great solace.*

Ecclesiasticus 51:27

Ich will euch trösten, wie einen seine
Mutter tröstet.

*I will comfort you, as one whom his mother
comforts.*

Isaiah 66:13

VI. Andante – Vivace – Allegro

In this, the most expansively dramatic of Brahms's meditations, the composer summons all his forces to convey the mystery and majesty of the Divine. A searching introduction in the chorus gives way to the baritone soloist, who intones the famous prophecy of the end of days. The music gathers force in a *dies irae*—style middle section, but instead of the imagery of fear and judgment, we have words of assurance and triumph. Offbeat blasts from the brass (the "last trumpet"—literally, Posaune—trombone) enhance the drama. The text borrows heavily from Handel, using the same verses made famous in *Messiah*, as does the grandly planned fugue that concludes it.

Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende
Statt, sondern die zukünftige suchen
wir.

*For we have here no enduring home,
but we look for one to come.*

Hebrews 13:14

Siehe, ich sage euch ein Geheimnis:
Wir werden nicht alle entschlafen, wir
werden aber alle verwandelt werden;
und dasselbige plötzlich, in einem
Augenblick, zu der Zeit der letzten
Posaune.

*Behold, I tell you a mystery:
We will not all pass away, but we will all
be transformed; and this in the same instant,
in the blink of an eye, at the sound of the last
trumpet.*

Denn es wird die Posaune schallen,
und die Toten werden auferstehen
unverweslich, und wir werden
verwandelt werden.

*For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will
arise uncorrupted, and we will be transformed.*

Dann wird erfüllet werden das Wort,
das geschrieben steht: Der Tod ist
verschlungen in den Sieg. Tod, wo ist
dein Stachel? Hölle, wo ist dein Sieg?

*Then will be fulfilled the word that stands
recorded: Death is swallowed up in victory.
Death, where is your sting? Hell, where is your
victory?*

I Corinthians 15:51–55

Herr, du bist würdig, zu nehmen Preis
und Ehre und Kraft, denn du hast alle
Dinge erschaffen, und durch deinen
Willen haben sie das Wesen und sind
geschaffen.

*Lord, you are worthy to receive praise and honor
and power, for you have created all things, and
through your will they have their being and were
created.*

Revelation 4:11

VII. Feierlich

Brahms brings us full circle, musically and textually, with a final movement that directly recalls the work's opening. The themes of comfort, return and repose are seen through the prism of all that has come before. Strikingly, it is the only moment in which Brahms chooses to directly address the departed ones—using a parallel construction ("blessed are the dead"—"blessed are they who mourn") to remind us that they remain part of our lives. The soaring soprano melody that opens the scene, repeated later in the tenor line, is free and unstructured, a release—a culmination—of all the tension built up in the fugue that ended the sixth movement. Here, Brahms deploys some of the most ancient musical vocabulary of the whole *Requiem*, drawing on his experience of earlier composers, most especially Heinrich Schütz. His use of the trombones, old instruments particularly associated with the music of the early church, is one of the many archaisms to be found here. The final pages of the *Requiem*, as no other experience in music, are a depiction of grief reconciled, grief made intelligible—and even productive—by love, remembrance, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Selig sind die Toten, die in dem
Herren sterben, von nun an. Ja,
der Geist spricht, dass sie ruhen von
ihrer Arbeit; denn ihre Werke folgen
ihnen nach.

*Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord, from
henceforth. Yea, the spirit declares that they may
rest from their labors; for their works follow
after them.*

Revelation 14:13