

Notes on the Program

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Ein deutsches Requiem (A German Requiem), Op. 45

Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms worked on *A German Requiem* over many years, unveiling it sequentially as a three-movement piece (in 1867), a six-movement piece (in 1868), and ultimately a seven-movement piece (in 1869). He wrote it without the impetus of a commission. He had nothing to gain from it apart from articulating what he wanted and needed to express. To do that, he had to invent a format that was practically without precedent in the history of requiems. His would not be a liturgical requiem using the preordained Latin text of the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead. As the title page made clear, his was a German requiem, not a Latin one; in naming it thus, he referred to the language of its text and nothing more. In 1867 Brahms remarked in a letter to Carl Martin Reinthaler, the organist of the Bremen Cathedral, "I will admit that I could happily omit the 'German' and simply say 'Human.'" It is significant, however, that he did not name his piece simply *Deutsches Requiem*, as he could have. The word "ein," little article that it is, packs a wallop of meaning here. By naming his work *Ein deutsches Requiem (A German Requiem)* Brahms makes clear that this is one of many possible ways to remember the dead: where a Latin requiem could be expected to follow the rules of its tradition, a German requiem involves personal choice.

It might graciously be said that Brahms was mature for his age. Certainly the composer who would write the *Lieblieder Waltzer* was capable of charm and airiness, but in general his musical demeanor tended toward the serious and even the morose.

But if the 33-year-old Brahms was drawn preternaturally to the topic of death, there

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: principally in 1866, although Brahms had begun it as early as 1861, and he brought it to its final form in 1868

World premiere: first three movements premiered December 1, 1867, in Vienna, with Johann Herbeck conducting the Gesellschaft für Musikfreunde, baritone Rudolf Panzer, soloist. First performance of six movements, on April 10, 1868, in the Cathedral of Bremen, with the composer conducting, baritone Julius Stockhausen, soloist. "Ihr habt nur Traurigkeit" premiered independently, on September 17, 1868, at Zurich's Tonhalle, with Friedrich Hegar conducting, soprano Ida Suter-Weber, soloist. The final, seven-movement version, premiered February 18, 1869, in Leipzig, by the Gewandhaus Orchestra, Carl Reinecke, conductor, soprano Emilie Bellingrath-Wagner and baritone Franz Krückl, soloists

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 30, 1912, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), soprano Florence Hindle and baritone Hamilton Earle, soloists, with the Oratorio Society of New York

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 8, 2016, Christoph von Dohnányi, conductor, with Camilla Tilling, soprano, Matthias Goerne, baritone, and New York Choral Artists

Estimated duration: ca. 65 minutes

Christ.” Brahms was not interested in Reintaler’s theological objection, but he did end up inserting a movement, the lyrical “Ihr habt nur Traurigkeit,” in which the solo soprano makes her only appearance. Brahms’s first English biographer, Florence May, related that he said that “when writing [this movement] he had thought of his mother,” an entirely credible assertion given the text Brahms extracted from Isaiah: “I will comfort you, as one whom his mother comforts.”

The work begins with one of the Beatitudes: “Selig sind, die da Leid tragen, denn sie sollen getröstet werdet” (“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted”). The word “Tod” (“Death”) is not invoked until the penultimate movement, and the departed are really the subject only in the work’s conclusion. “Selig sind die Toten” (“Blessed are the dead”) sing the sopranos at the opening of that final movement, their benediction making the circle

A Friend’s Assessment

After she was presented with the score of *A German Requiem*, in December of 1866, Clara Schumann — Robert’s widow and Brahms’s close companion — wrote to the composer:

I am completely filled with your Requiem. It is an immense piece that takes hold of one’s whole being like very little else. The profound seriousness, combined with all the magic and poetry, has a wonderful, deeply moving and soothing effect.

complete. Perhaps more than any other musical work, this requiem for the departed offers consolation for those who remain behind.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, two harps, organ, and strings, plus a four-part mixed chorus, and soprano and baritone soloists.

Precious Melancholy

Johannes Brahms was 33 years old in 1866, when he focused his efforts on what would become *Ein deutsches Requiem* (*A German Requiem*). The idea of composing such a piece had already been on his mind for some time, and he drafted sections of the opening movements as early as 1861, when he was 28. What, one might wonder, would inspire a 28-year-old (or a 33-year-old, for that matter) to invest years of effort writing a requiem whose somber subject would seem out of place in a mind so young?

Pondering this question, the German musicologist Ulrich Dibelius drew up a list of composers of famous requiems and found that most were not attracted to the idea until “after the midlife crisis.” Only Berlioz and Mozart, 34 and 35, respectively, when they penned their Requiems, come close to Brahms’s age, and in both cases they were goaded into their projects by lucrative commissions. More normal are the ages of such requiem composers as Saint-Saëns (42), Ligeti (42), Fauré (43), Duruflé (45), Dvořák (49), and Verdi (61).



Brahms, ca. 1866

Text and Translation

Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem)

Chorus

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

Blessed are they that 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 that sow in tears
shall reap in joy.
He that goes forth and weeps,
bearing precious seed,
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
bringing his sheaves with him.

— Psalm 126:5–6

Chorus

*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 man
as the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower thereof falls away.

— I Peter 1:24

*So seid nun geduldig, lieben Brüder,
bis auf die Zukunft des Herrn.
Siehe ein Ackermann wartet
auf die köstliche Frucht der Erde
und ist geduldig darüber,
bis er empfahe
den Morgenregen und Abendregen.
So seid geduldig.*

Be patient, therefore, brethren,
unto the coming of the Lord.
Behold, the husband waits
for the precious fruit of the earth,
and hath long patience for it,
until he receive the early
and latter rain.
Be ye also patient.

— James 5:7–8

Aber des Herrn Wort bleibet in Ewigkeit.

But the word of the Lord endures forever.

— I Peter 1:25

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

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion
with songs and everlasting joy upon their
heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

— Isaiah 35:10

Baritone and Chorus

*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 Handbreit
vor dir,
und mein Leben ist wie nichts vor dir.*

*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 kriegen wird.*

*Nun Herr, wes soll ich mich trösten?
Ich hoffe auf dich.*

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

Chorus

*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!*

Soprano and Chorus

*Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit;
aber ich will euch wieder sehen
und euer Herz soll sich freuen,
und eure Freude soll niemand von euch nehmen.*

*Ich will euch trösten,
wie einen seine Mutter tröstet.*

Lord, teach me that there must be an end of me,
and my life has a term,
and I must go hence.

Behold, my days are a handbreadth
before thee,
and my life is as nothing before Thee:
Ah, what vain things are all men, that yet
live so sure of themselves.

They go about like a shadow, and make
themselves much useless anxiety; they
amass possessions,
and know not who will enjoy them.

Now, Lord, in what shall I find solace?
My hope is in Thee.

— Psalm 39:4–7

The souls of the righteous
are in God's hand,
And no pain touches them.

— Wisdom 3:1

How amiable are Thy tabernacles,
O Lord of hosts!

My soul desires, yea, even longs
for the courts of the Lord:
my heart and my flesh
cry out for the living God.

Blessed are they that dwell in thy house:
they will still be praising Thee.

— Psalm 84:1–2, 4

Ye now therefore have sorrow;
but I will see you again,
and your heart shall rejoice,
and your joy no man taketh from you.

— John 16:22

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

— Isaiah 66:13

*Sehet mich an: ich habe
eine kleine Zeit Mühe und Arbeit gehabt
und habe großen Trost gefunden.*

Behold me: I have for a little while had
tribulation and labor, and have found
great comfort.

— Ecclesiasticus 51:35

Baritone and Chorus

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

For here have we no enduring city,
but we seek 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.
Denn es wird die Posaune schallen
und die Toten werden auferstehen unverweslich,
und wir werden verwandelt werden.
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?*

Behold, I shew you a mystery;
we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be
changed.
In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,
at the last trumpet:
For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead
shall be raised incorruptible,
and we shall be changed.
Then shall be brought to pass
the saying that is written:
Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory?
— I Corinthians 15:51–52, 54–55

*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.*

Thou art worthy, O Lord,
to receive glory and honor and power:
for Thou hast created all things,
and for Thy pleasure
they are and were created.

— Revelation 4:11

Chorus

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

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord
from henceforth.
Yea, says the Spirit, that they may rest from
their labors;
and their works do follow them.

— Revelation 14:13