

BRAHMS REQUIEM *program notes*

A German Requiem

Johannes Brahms

The premiere of Johannes Brahms' *A German Requiem* took place in 1869, almost exactly five years before that of Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*. In a way, the two works defined the German-Italian split that had festered in the music world for decades, if not centuries. In Verdi's work, one could hear (indeed, couldn't avoid) the influence of opera — at the time, the center of Italian cultural life. Brahms' work, by contrast, sprang from the tradition of German symphonic music. Verdi's *Requiem* is grand and dramatic; Brahms' is subdued and tautly structured. Verdi's is extroverted, while Brahms' is intensely introspective.

Another difference: whereas Verdi's *Requiem* came to stand as one of that composer's last great works, the *German Requiem* was Brahms' first fully successful foray into large-scale composition. Ironically, it is music that emerged, in some part, from a prior failure at harnessing large forces in music.

Back in 1854, Brahms (who was 21 at the time) had attempted to write his first symphony. However, the composer suffered from fears that he couldn't handle the symphonic form; after much struggle, he eventually shelved the work. Parts of that music instead evolved into his First Piano Concerto, completed in 1858.

But when the concerto was premiered early the following year, it was so detested by audiences that the sensitive composer foreswore large-scale orchestral composing altogether for some time.

It took the death of both Brahms' mother and his long-time friend (and fellow composer) Robert Schumann to shake Brahms out of his self-doubt. He began devoting himself more and more single-mindedly toward the task of writing a *Requiem* for chorus and orchestra.

From the outset, it was to be a work on a grand scale, and of unprecedented originality. Importantly, Brahms approached the *German Requiem* as a consolation for the living, rather than the traditional

conception of a *Requiem* as a prayer for the departed. Toward that end, Brahms eschewed the traditional Catholic *Requiem Mass* texts (and, for that matter, the Latin language) in favor of a more personal work structured out of select texts from the Bible, sung in German. The texts are organized such that Brahms' concept is clear from the first line (an excerpt from the Book of Matthew): "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

For musical material, Brahms turned to abandoned fragments from the aborted first symphony. That music became the core of the *German Requiem's* brilliant second movement, "Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras" ("For all flesh is as grass").

From there, the work blossomed, even though Brahms was waylaid from the project at times by other work. He completed a six-movement version of the piece in 1866, and the first three movements were premiered at a concert in Vienna on December 1 of the following year.

Astonishingly, that performance was met with yet more booing and hissing from the audience. Blame this time, though, was laid at the feet of the timpanist at the first performance, who reportedly played so loudly during the fugal section of the third movement that he drowned out the entire orchestra and chorus.

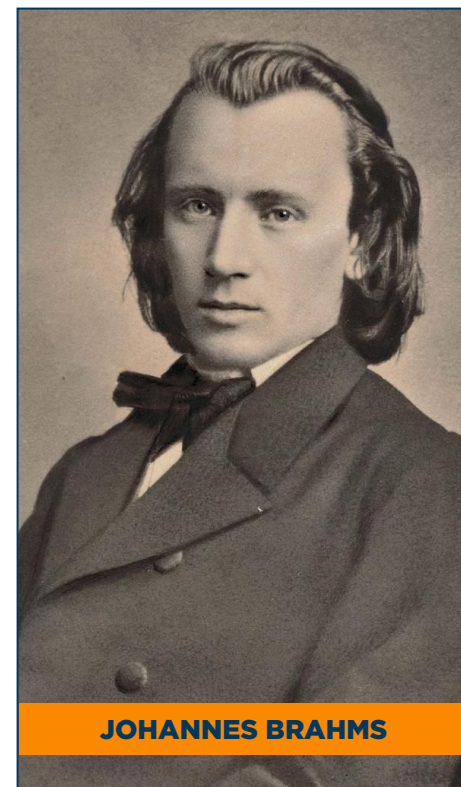
At the first performance of the six-movement version of the *German Requiem*, the composer was finally redeemed: Both the public and the critics lauded the work as a groundbreaking achievement in German music. Brahms himself was not fully satisfied, however, and he soon inserted the glorious fifth movement out of concern that his creation was too dour. The movement, which features a radiant solo for soprano, was a memorial to his mother, and it quickly became one of the piece's most beloved sections. In this seven-movement version, the *German Requiem* was heard no fewer than 20 times in Germany in its first year of existence.

Despite the fact that Brahms held his *German Requiem* fundamentally apart

from the *Requiem* of the traditional Catholic mass, there are some surface similarities of structure that bear notice. For example, one can hear in Brahms' ominous and at times thunderous second movement, "Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras" ("For all flesh is as grass"), echoes of the "Dies irae" movements (which also traditionally occur in second position) of *Requiem*s by Mozart or Verdi.

But overall, the message of Brahms' *German Requiem* is fundamentally different from that of more traditional works; and so is the musical language. As in so much of Brahms' compositions, this is densely harmonized music, in which the linear melody is often appointed in such rich harmonies that it can, on first listen, occasionally be obscured. In those moments, it's worth savoring the richness of Brahms' harmonies, his sense of balance and appropriate heft.

And then, like a razor slicing through velvet, the melody will re-emerge, pointing the way toward the next idea — which, in this case, is ever toward comfort and redemption: "Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors," the chorus sings in the last movement, quoting Revelation xiv. 13: "And their works do follow them."



JOHANNES BRAHMS

A GERMAN REQUIEM

text translation

English Translation by Lara Hoggard and David Bowden

I. Chorus

Blessed are they who are sorrowful, who mourn;
for they shall have comfort. (Matthew 5:4)

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
Who goeth forth and weepeth, and beareth precious seed
shall come with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

II. Chorus

For mortal flesh is as the grass,
and all the comeliness of man is as the grasses' flowers.
The grass hath withered, and the flower thereof hath fallen.
(1 Peter 1:24)

Now therefore be patient, my dear brethren, unto the
coming of the Lord.
See how the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of
the earth,
and how with patience abideth till he receiveth the
morning showers,
and then the evening rain. Therefore be patient. (James
5:7, 8)

For mortal flesh is as the grass.
And all the comeliness of man is as the grasses' flowers.
The grass hath withered, and the flower thereof hath fallen.
(1 Peter 1:24)

But yet, the Lord's word endureth forevermore.
(1 Peter 1:25)

The redeemed of the Lord shall return with singing unto Zion;
Unto Zion they shall come with rejoicing;
Joy everlasting forever on their heads shall be;
Joy and delight shall seize them and possess them,
and pain and sighing shall flee from them. (Isaiah 35:10)

III. Baritone Solo and Chorus

Lord, teach me to know the measure of my days on earth,
that my life hath an ending, and I must perish.
Surely all my days here are as a handbreadth to Thee,
and my lifetime is as naught to Thee.
Surely as nothing are all peoples,
who yet securely dwell in their vanities!
Man liveth his days like a shadow,
and he disquieteth himself in vain with prideful delusions;
his treasure, he knoweth not who shall gather them.

Now, Lord, what then is my comfort?
My hope is in Thee! (Psalm 39: 4 - 7)

For the righteous souls are in the hand of God,
and there no grief nigh them shall come. (Wisdom of
Solomon 3:1)

IV. Chorus

How lovely is Thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! For my
soul desireth and longeth for the courts of the Lord; my
soul and body crieth out, yea, for the living God.
O blest are they who in Thy house are dwelling; they
praise Thy name evermore! (Psalm 84:1, 2, 4)

V. Soprano Solo and Chorus

You now are sorrowful. Ev'n so, I will again behold you,
and then your heart shall be joyful, and your joy shall no
one take from you. (John 16:22)

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

Look upon me: I suffered for a little time; toil and labor
were mine;
and I have found, at last, comfort. (Ecclesiasticus
[Sirach] 51:35)

I will give you comfort, as one whom his own mother
comforts. (Isaiah 66:13)

VI. Baritone Solo and Chorus

For we have on earth no enduring place:
Even so we seek one to come. (Hebrews 13:14)

Lo, I unfold unto 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 time of the
last trumpet!

For at last shall the trumpet sound, and the dead shall
then rise up incorruptible,
and we shall all be changed.

Then will be fulfilled the Word that is written:
"then Death shall be swallowed up in victory."

Death, where is thy sting!

Hell, where is thy victory! (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52, 54, 55)

Lord, Thou art worthy to have all praise and honor and
power and might,
for Thou hast heaven and earth created,
and by Thy good will do all things have their being and
were created. (Revelation 4:11)

VII. Chorus

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from
henceforth." Yea, the Spirit speaks, "that they rest
from all their labor, for their works follow after them."
(Revelation 14:13)