

Ein deutsches Requiem [“A German Requiem”], opus 45
by **Johannes Brahms** (1833–1897)

The History of Brahms’s *Requiem*

What were you like at age twenty? Perhaps you were in college, training for a career. Perhaps you had already embarked on that career, with varying degrees of confidence and trepidation. Perhaps you saw a life of many diverse opportunities yet awaiting you. In any case, recall yourself at age twenty, and imagine that the world’s leading authority in your field crowned you the next global genius. Would this increase your confidence? Or cause a new wave of self-criticism, even fear of inevitable failure? Thus was Brahms’s blessing and curse when Robert Schumann, the pre-eminent figure in German concert music, acclaimed his younger colleague in the October 1853 issue of his newspaper, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Brahms was seen by the few who had heard his piano music as the chosen one who would lead a generation of German composers to their rightful place as the world’s supreme musicians.

Brahms’s life had been relatively unprepossessing. He was born in 1833 in Hamburg, a port city in northern Germany not noted for its musical establishment. His father would today be classified as a freelance musician, playing frequently at taverns and joining the militia band. The young Brahms studied piano from age seven and eventually began playing professionally in restaurants and theaters (though not seaside brothels, as is commonly believed). In 1853, while touring Germany as the accompanist for an expatriate Hungarian violinist, he met Liszt and the day’s leading violinist, Joseph Joachim. The latter encouraged Brahms to introduce himself to Robert Schumann, which he did in September 1853. The very next month, the master-composer introduced his new young friend to the world.

That February, Schumann suffered a mental breakdown and attempted suicide, leading to his incarceration in an asylum. His wife, Clara, was one of the nineteenth century’s greatest pianists. In order to make ends meet, she reenergized her concertizing throughout Europe. Brahms, having developed a close relationship with the Schumann household, moved in with them to attend to family and business duties. He remained close to Clara, accompanying her on concert trips and spending much time in Düsseldorf, until Robert’s death in July 1856, when he began to perform with greater frequency. Brahms gained seasonal appointments as conductor of the court choir and orchestra at Detmold and an amateur women’s choir in Hamburg. In September 1862 Brahms first visited Vienna, and began to develop a reputation as an important composer of chamber music, piano works, and art songs. The next season he served as conductor of the Vienna Singakademie, with which he programmed Renaissance motets, music by Bach, and earlier nineteenth-century works, showing a refined ear for music of the near and distant past. These early styles were already fundamentally influencing his own choral compositions.

In 1864 Brahms’s father left his wife, a seamstress who was seventeen years his senior. The composer remained on excellent terms with both parents, even helping to secure his father a position with the Hamburg Philharmonic. When his mother died in February 1865, Brahms was deeply stricken. He soon after began composing his *Requiem*, a major work for baritone soloist, mixed chorus, and large orchestra. His feelings about the death of his mother certainly mingled with his memories of the death of his friend and inspiration Robert Schumann; indeed, Brahms even resurrected materials he had initially composed in 1854, the year of Schumann’s breakdown. With rapidity remarkable for a composer so plagued by self-criticism, Brahms completed a six-movement work of about an hour’s duration by summer 1866.

The first three movements were performed in Vienna on December 1, 1867, to mixed reaction. The six-movement work waited for its premiere until April 10, 1868 (Good Friday), at the cathedral in Bremen. This performance was a rousing success, but the *Requiem*’s story was not over yet. The following month, Brahms appended what is now the fifth movement, with soprano solo. (Legend avers that he composed this movement soon after visiting his mother’s gravesite.) The work received its first truly complete performance

on February 18, 1869 at the famed Gewandhaus in Leipzig, where it was a decided failure. (The first performance of the First Piano Concerto in Leipzig in 1859 was also a flop). But the Bremen performance had achieved such renown throughout Europe that the work's fame was secure. Here was Brahms's first glimpse of major accomplishment. The *Requiem* pre-dates all the symphonies, most of the concertos, and the many shorter works for chorus and orchestra. Schumann's 1853 article had encouraged Brahms to "direct his magic wand where the massed forces of chorus and orchestra may lend him their power." Schumann was right. It was this *Requiem* that confirmed his pronouncement that Brahms would someday become the most prominent composer of his generation.

A Note on the Version for Piano Four-Hands

Robert Schumann observed that, in the hands of Brahms the pianist-composer, the piano became "an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices." Schumann was observing that, like the piano music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms's early keyboard works, as heard on Schumann's 1839 Conrad Graf fortepiano, was full of "orchestrated" colors and had the fullness of texture of an orchestra, sounding as if they are about to burst their seams. It was far more difficult, even in culture-savvy Germany, to hear a live orchestra perform in the late nineteenth century than it is now. On the other hand, every self-respecting middleclass home had a piano, and children, especially daughters, were routinely taught to play piano in their youth. Thus developed a great tradition of publishing reductions of orchestral works for "piano four-hands," i.e., two pianists sharing one keyboard. Such versions played a cultural role akin to today's recordings, allowing a broader public to encounter the music directly.

Brahms made such a reduction of his *Requiem*, re-working the entire score—including the choral and solo vocal parts—into the piano. This version was published in 1869 and was used in the work's first performance in Britain. That presentation, in 1871, took place at the fashionable London home of the eminent surgeon Sir Henry Thompson and was very much a private event. The pianists were the host's wife and the aged composer Cipriani Potter. Julius Stockhausen, a friend and occasional touring partner of Brahms, undertook the dual roles of conductor and baritone soloist. The choir numbered about thirty voices. Brahms's reduced version therefore allows chamber choirs—such as Choral Arts—to present a masterwork which would otherwise be logistically and financially unfeasible to mount. We will perform a slight adaptation, omitting the piano part passages that function merely to double the choir or soloists. The result is akin to the engravings that were often made of large oil paintings: both transfers allow the craftsmanship to shine through with perhaps even greater clarity than in the "full-color" version. The *Requiem* is one of Brahms's most personal work, and in this version we hear layers of nuance which are generally hidden by the full orchestra. The text is distinct and audible. The choral bass line is pronounced, not hidden within Brahms's typically bass-heavy orchestration. The fifth movement becomes an art song for soprano soloist with choral support. Essentially, Brahms's voice becomes more intimate, more delicate, and even more personal.

A Closer Look at Brahms's *Requiem*

The traditional Latin Requiem consists of liturgical texts appropriate to a Mass for the Dead, which Brahms opted against. This decision placed him in a tradition dating at least back to Heinrich Schütz in the seventeenth century, when early Lutherans often titled works with Catholic references (Mass, Requiem, Passion, oratorio), but chose Biblical or poetic texts in the vernacular language. After Brahms's work was published with the title *Ein deutsches Requiem*—"A German Requiem"—and had gained popularity beyond German-speaking lands, Brahms wrote that he expressed regret for his chosen title: "I will admit that I could happily omit the 'German' and simply say 'Human' (or for 'Mankind')." For this reason, the work is often justifiably performed in the local language. We have opted to perform it in German, remaining true to Brahms's original careful linkages between words and music.

The composer compiled the texts himself from an 1833 modernization of Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible. Brahms's personal library survives to us today, and his Bible includes extensive markings that

show his searches for texts for this and other works. Indeed, the libretto's only equal in the history of oratorio is Charles Jennens's libretto for Handel's *Messiah*. Brahms made several interesting decisions while compiling his text. The astute reader will note the absence of any reference to Christ. (This caused quite a problem for the cathedral authorities at the Bremen premiere, where it was finally decided to allow an alto soloist to sing "I know that my Redeemer liveth" from *Messiah* between the third movement and the intermission.) Not only is Christ deliberately avoided, the dead themselves are not mentioned until the penultimate movement, and then only in the context of becoming *unverweslich* ("un-decomposable," or, as the King James version has it, "incorruptible"). Instead, it is the living who occupy the verses Brahms chose.

In the *Requiem*, Brahms's reputation as supreme craftsman is brought to the fore. The opening movement immediately sets forth many principles that guide the entire work. The first sounds one hears are a low octave followed by the interval of a minor seventh, a striking and unconventional sonority. The minor seventh and its cousin, the tritone, prove a harmonic and melodic linchpin. For example, the minor seventh is again prominent in the alto line of the very first choral entrance: *Selig sind* ("Blessed are"). The sopranos meanwhile introduce another unifying motive: the ascending third followed by a half-step. This may seem like we are parsing the music too finely, but this is indeed the level of motivic detail from which Brahms grew his monumental works. He called these tiny units his "seed corn," and in nearly every melody in the entire *Requiem* begins with this formation, its inversion (the same intervals, but turned upside side), or its retrograde (the same intervals, but in reverse order). What's more, the first melody one hears, low in the piano (played by the cellos in the orchestral version), sounds like an adaptation of a Lutheran chorale tune. Scholars disagree whether Brahms's reference might be to *Wer nur den leben Gott läßt walten* ("They who leave all to God") or *Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele* ("Rejoice greatly, O my soul"). (The former has been historically held as the exemplar, but the latter draws a powerful link to Robert Schumann, as it was the only chorale he ever arranged.) This melody may also be Brahms's own, in the style of old chorales, but whatever the case, the basic materials for the entire *Requiem*—the interval of a minor-seventh and melodic third followed by a half-step—can be found in the simple rising-and-falling contour of this archaic-style tune, and all of these elements are prominent from the first minute of the *Requiem* on.

The second movement begins with material that Brahms had composed in 1854, shortly after Schumann's mental breakdown, for a discarded two-piano sonata version of what Brahms hoped would become his first symphony. The former sarabande-cum-scherzo now takes the guise of an off-kilter funeral march. The unison choral writing—given a darker hue by the omission of sopranos—emphasizes the text's evocation of life's apparent pointlessness. This dark funeral march is interrupted by a trio section in the style of a Ländler. This Austrian peasant dance helps to recall the fieldsman who patiently waits for his crop to grow. The basses begin a grand affirmation that "the redeemed of the Lord will come again," directly flaunting the dark and apparently hopeless texture of the movement's start.

The baritone soloist first appears in the third movement, reminiscent of a Lutheran pastor. Brahms's preference for low, dark textures is evident in the sparse, harmonically unsettled accompaniment. The chorus, akin to a faithful congregation, repeats the baritone's questioning plea: *Herr, lehre doch mich daß ein Ende mit mir haben muß* ("Lord, teach me when I will have my end"). In a brief but remarkable moment of metric ambiguity, the choir finally emerges from such disconsolate musings to decree: *Ich hoffe auf dich* ("I hope in you"). One prominent feature of the ensuing fugue is Brahms's unusual use of a technique known as the pedal-point. Traditionally, a long fugue such as this will lead up to its end with a long note held in the lowest register; this note will final resolve down a fifth to the tonic, or home-pitch, of the work. Brahms's pedal is a low D, but instead of relenting for the final chord, the D stays strong to reveal itself *as* the tonic pitch. Brahms called this the "eternal D." Bernard Shaw, a noted music critic as well as playwright, spoke less kindly, calling it "mere brute musical faculty" and comparing Brahms to "a first-class undertaker." In any case, it is a striking representation of the positivism of the text.

The fourth movement has gained widespread popularity as a church anthem, generally translated as “How lovely is your dwelling-place.” So it is particularly odd that in 1865 Brahms himself considered this movement “the weakest part of the said German Requiem” and thought to replace it. But it pleased Clara Schumann and so it remained. After the weighty theology and complex harmonic developments of the previous two movements, its relaxed, gentle lilt, not unlike a Viennese waltz, is quite refreshing. The movement’s climactic moment is achieved in a brief double-fugato during which different choral sections simultaneously take on two different melodic ideas, one quick and the other slow, to represent the angels who *loben dich immerdar* (“praise you [the Lord] forever”). The resulting hemiolas unsettle the entire flowing rhythmic construction, but the movement ends gently.

Brahms added the fifth movement two years after the completion of the rest of the work. Here he took a different approach in the relationship between soloist and chorus. In the context of the complete *Requiem*, the soprano soloist’s text seems a direct consolation from one deceased to one living. The soprano remains constantly in a high register, reflecting this point of view. One prominent soprano is believed to have commented that a register of such height was needed to explore meanings of such depth. The choir, however, serves simply as support, gently intoning: *Ich will euch trösten, wie einen seine Mutter tröstet* (“I will comfort you, as a mother comforts”). The parallel to the recent death of Brahms’s own mother is inescapable.

After such comforting words and music in the fifth movement, the sixth comes as an immediate, even shocking, shift. The baritone soloist’s declamation is repeated by the chorus. The middle section of this movement is sometimes termed Brahms’s “Dies irae,” in reference to the hyper-dramatic music that usually accompanies the Latin Requiem’s account of the Judgment Day. The music is certainly the fastest and loudest of the work, but it is free from theatrical effects: it is simple harmony that drives the cascading sequences of *Hölle, wo ist dein Sieg* (“Hell, where is your victory”) to its homophonic final pronouncement. Likewise, it is not Heaven that judges but Hell itself that is conquered in a jubilant celebration.

The concluding fugue *Herr, du bist würdig* (“Lord, you are worthy”) is based on a four-measure melody. Three times the music pulls back, modulating mysteriously to new keys with Baroque delicacy. Each time that the fugue subject returns, it is treated in *stretto*, meaning that subsequent entrances are compressed: the response comes after just two measures, then one, then finally after merely half of a measure, as the full choir acclaim in turn: *Herr* (“Lord”). Even more remarkable is that this tune is purely based on a variant of the *Requiem*’s opening three-note motive, in this case a descending half-step followed by a third. The fugue also splendidly balances contrapuntal writing, when each voice behaves independently, and homophony, when all move together. The entire fugue is a construction worthy of the great master Bach himself.

Not until the final movement do the dead become Brahms’s primary concern: *Selig sind die Toten* (“Blessed are the dead”). As if to emphasize that the dead are with the Lord, the opening pitches of *Selig* (“Blessed”) are identical to those of *Herr* (“Lord”) in the preceding fugue. The entire *Requiem* has been so carefully constructed around this intervallic pattern that when the *Selig sind* motive returns from the first movement, the feeling is that it never left. Perhaps this is Brahms’s point entirely: that the dead never leave but remain present in the hearts of the living. A truly “human” *Requiem* indeed, indicating that we are all *selig*—blessed.

by Gary D. Cannon, with George Bozarth

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1.

Selig sind, die da Leid tragen,
denn sie sollen getröstet werden.
— 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.
— Psalm 126: 5–6

Blessed are they that carry sorrow,
for they shall grow consoled.

They who sow with tears, grow with harvested joy.
They who go out weeping and carrying noble seeds
will come with joys and will bring their sheaves.

2.

Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras
und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen
wie des Grases Blumen.
Das Gras ist verdorret und die Blume abgefallen.
— 1 Peter 1: 24

So seid nun geduldig, liebe 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.
— James 5: 7

Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras...

Aber des Herrn Wort bleibet in Ewigkeit.
— 1 Peter 1: 25

Die Erlöseten des Herrn werden wieder kommen,
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.
— Isaiah 35: 10

For all flesh, it is as grass,
and all the glory of mankind
as the grass's flowers.
The grass had dried up, and the flower fallen off.

So be now patient, beloved brotters,
until the coming of the Lord.
See how the fieldsman waits
for the more delicious fruit of the earth,
and is beyond patient,
until he receives the morning and evening rain.

For all flesh, it is as grass...

But the Lord's word remains for eternity.

The redeemed of the Lord will again come,
and toward Zion come with rejoicing;
eternal joy will be on their heads;
joy and bliss will be achieved,
and pain and sighing must go away.

3.

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, wess soll ich mich trösten?
Ich hoffe auf dich.

— Psalm 39: 5–8

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

— Wisdom of Solomon 3:1

Lord, teach me yet
that I must have an end,
and my life has a finish, and I must have thereof.

Behold, my days are a hand's width to you,
and my life is as nothing to you.

Alas, even as nothing is all mankind,
those who are yet so certain to love.
You go therefore as a silhouette,
and make them much needless unrest;
they gather it, and know not who will get it.

Now Lord, who shall comfort me?
I hope in you.

The souls of the righteous are in God's hand
and no torment will touch them.

There will be a 20-minute intermission.

4.

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen, Herr Zebaoth!

Meine Seele verlanget 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!

— Psalm 84: 2–3, 5

How lovely are your dwellings, Lord of hosts!

My soul longs and yearns for
the fore-courts of the Lord;
my body and soul look for
the living God.

Fortunate are those who dwell in your house,
who praise you forever.

5.

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

— John 16:22

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

— Ecclesiasticus 51:27

Ich will euch trösten, wie einen seine Mutter tröstet.
— Isaiah 66:13

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

See me:
I have a little time of toil and work,
and have found great comfort.

I will comfort you, as one's mother comforts.

6.

Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt,
sondern die zukünftige suchen wir.
— 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?
— 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, 54–55

Herr, du bist würdig zu nehmen Preis
und Ehre und Kraft,
denn du hast alle Dinge geschaffen,
und durch deinen Willen haben,
sie das Wesen und sind geschaffen.
— Revelation 4:11

For we have here no permanent city,
but the future city we seek.

Behold, I tell you a mystery:
we shall not all pass away,
but we shall be changed
in a sudden moment, in the glimpse of an eye,
at the hour of the last horn.

For the horn will resound,
and the dead shall arise un-decomposable,
and we shall be changed.

Then shall be fulfilled the word
that is written:
Death is devoured in victory.
Death, where is your sting?
Hell, where is your victory?

Lord, you are worthy to take praise
and honor and power,
for you have created all things,
and by your will
they, the entities, are created.

7.

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.
— Revelation 14: 13

Blessed are the dead,
those who die in the Lord, from now on.
Yes, the Spirit says that they rest from their work,
and their deeds follow after them.

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