

Brahms: *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Op. 45

Brahms's *German Requiem* is the longest work the composer ever wrote. It surpasses his symphonies and concertos. (He never wrote an opera). The work was received enthusiastically from the premiere performance and it established Brahms internationally as a composer deserving of the greatest respect.

In spite of the fact that the word "Requiem" stands as its title, the composition has little connection with the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass with Latin text. Brahms conceived something quite different: a concert work in the Protestant Lutheran tradition with German texts taken entirely from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and the Apochrypha. Brahms selected and arranged the order of the texts himself with a goal of conveying comfort and hope for the bereaved rather than the medieval visions of pain and fear connected with the Last Judgment as depicted by Berlioz, Verdi and Dvorák. Brahms was not an active churchgoer but he was an avid student of the Lutheran (German) Bible. His copy of the Bible, now preserved in a museum in Vienna, is full of penciled annotations.

Brahms's mother's death in 1865 is often cited as the stimulus for composing the work because he was working on it after returning from her funeral to Vienna. However, this is an arguable point because he had been working on it for quite some time before she died. Three months after his mother's death he sent two movements to his friend, Clara Schumann. These were the first and fourth movements ("Blest are they that mourn," and "How lovely is thy dwelling place"). In his letter to Clara he also mentions the second movement ("Behold, all flesh is grass"). This movement, which is like a slow dance in triple meter called a sarabande, had actually begun life more than ten years earlier as a scherzo of a two-piano sonata in D minor, which Clara and Brahms had played together at her home after her husband, Robert Schumann, had to be moved to an insane asylum after he had attempted suicide. Schumann eventually died, and Brahms told his friend Joseph Joachim that the *German Requiem* was also closely associated with the memory of Robert Schumann, who had written prophetically many years earlier, "When he [Brahms] lowers his magic wand on the masses of choir and orchestra whose powers endow him with strength, we shall await wondrous glimpses into the world of the spirit."

By 1866, the *German Requiem* had six movements. The first three were performed in Vienna by the Society of Friends of Music under the direction of Johann von Herbeck. The results were a disappointment. The chorus did not know the work well enough and the timpanist was over enthusiastic and made so much noise in the third movement that Brahms himself hissed. Brahms's friend, Theodor Billroth, observed in a letter: "His *Requiem* is so nobly spiritual and so Protestant-Bach-like that it was difficult to make it acceptable here [in Catholic Vienna]."

The next performance of the then six-movement work took place in the cathedral in Bremen, Germany, on Good Friday, 10 April 1868. This time things went much

better. Brahms supervised the choral rehearsals and conducted the performance himself. The baritone solos were sung by his friend (and frequent performer of his songs), Julius Stockhausen. The audience was a surprise to Brahms. Over 2000 people came, including his father and Clara Schumann as well as his friends and musicians from all over Europe. The reaction, according to an account written at the time, was “overwhelming,” and the performance had to be repeated two weeks later, this time conducted by the cathedral’s music director, Karl Reinthaler.

However, the work had sparked another kind of controversy. Reinthaler complained to Brahms that the work was not more traditionally liturgical and did not include reference to the redemption of sinners. Brahms was unwilling to make changes to his selected texts and wrote back to Reinthaler, “As regards the title, I will confess that I would gladly have left out the ‘German’ and substituted ‘Human.’ Also that I knowingly and intentionally omitted passages such as St. John’s gospel, chapter 3, verse 16 [‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son...’] On the other hand, I have no doubt included much because I am a musician, because I required it, because I can neither argue away nor strike out a ‘henceforth’ from my precious extracts.” Reinthaler stuck to his theological argument and began the second performance with a soprano soloist singing “I know that my redeemer liveth” from Handel’s *Messiah*.

After these performances Brahms decided to add a seventh movement to the *German Requiem* at the suggestion of his former teacher, Eduard Marxsen. This is the movement with the soprano solo that conveys a message of maternal consolation. It was inserted as the fifth movement and the now seven-movement work was first performed in Leipzig, Germany, on 18 February 1869, conducted by Carol Reinecke. After that, performances were heard in every major European city including St. Petersburg, Russia, within a few years.

Brahms’s comment that he had considered naming the work “A Human Requiem” is important because it is universal in scope. He avoids all mention of Christ in his text selections, though the word “Lord” [*Herr* in German] might be taken as a reference to the Messiah of the New Testament.

The idea of a *German Requiem* was also not new. In 1636 Heinrich Schütz had described his *Musikalische Exequien* as “a Concerto in the form of a German Burial Mass.” This work shares with Brahms’s the text “Blessed are the dead” (the seventh movement in Brahms’s setting), though Schütz combines this text with the Song of Simeon [Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace]. Bach’s Cantata 106 [God’s time is best] is also an example of selected biblical texts on the subject of human mortality.

Brahms’s conception of the forces for his work involved huge proportions – a choir of more than 200 singers with a massive orchestra. However, he also arranged his orchestration for piano accompaniment and wrote another version for piano duet so that the work would be performed widely. In our performances we use a reduced

orchestration for chamber orchestra by Joachim Linckelmann. The string parts adhere to the original orchestration as does the timpani part. The original 19 other orchestral instruments are replaced by a woodwind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon).

Even though the *German Requiem* was composed over a span of several years, Brahms retains a broad symmetry in the layout of the movements that suggests a kind of mirror structure. The first and last movements have similar texts and share the same key. The second, third and sixth movements are similar in that they all move from images of despair and death to hope and triumph. The middle two movements speak of consolation. The fourth movement also offers relief after the drama of the preceding movements. The sixth movement, the longest in the work, is also the keystone of the structure. It begins with a lament on the transitory nature of life. The baritone soloist plays the role of a prophet, foretelling the future. The stormy middle section is the closest Brahms gets to the terrifying apocalyptic images that dominate so many of the Latin Requiem settings. Confidence is restored with a masterfully crafted fugue in the Handelian tradition.

The last movement returns to the spirit of the opening, emphasizing Brahms's principal message: consolation. Brahms was fond of the image of the closed circle, the balanced form and it is therefore appropriate that the chorus should sing "Blessed are the dead" to the theme which in the first movement accompanied the words "Blessed are those who mourn."