

Brahms: *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem)

David Schildkret

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The key to Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem) may well lie in a statement the composer made to Karl Reinthaler, who conducted the premiere of the complete work in Bremen on April 10, 1868: "...I will confess that I should gladly have left out the 'German' [in the title] and substituted 'human.'" Brahms's composition, a memorial not of any one death but of all deaths, is indeed a work of consolation and assurance that transcends any single creed to address all humanity.

Brahms worked on the *Requiem* intermittently over a period of some fourteen years. The earliest material – the opening of the second movement – dates from 1854, when it was sketched as part of an aborted symphony in D minor. The last music was the fifth movement, composed in June of 1868, after the first performance. Several pivotal events in the composer's life seem to have provided the impetus for the work: in 1854, Robert Schumann, Brahms's close friend, mentor, and enthusiastic supporter, attempted suicide; Schumann died in an asylum in 1856; Brahms's mother died in 1865. At each of these times, Brahms did some significant work on the *Requiem*. The title itself may have been inspired by Schumann, who contemplated writing a work by the same name. Despite its superficial connection to these events, however, the *German Requiem* remains a meditation on death and redemption, rather than a memorial either to Schumann or to Brahms's mother.

Musically, the work reflects its composer's eclectic nature. There are influences of Beethoven (including quotations from the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony), Cherubini (whose Requiem in C minor omits violins in the first movement), J.S. Bach, and even the motets of such Renaissance composers as Palestrina. Listening to the work, we are apt to be caught up in its emotional character, its vibrant Romantic sonorities, and its overall drama, and to overlook therefore the subtleties of its formal design. Like some of the larger cantatas of Bach, the work is a symmetrical arch: the first and seventh movements have similar texts and use some of the same musical material; movements two and six are similar in structure, with march-like openings and concluding fugues; movements three and five prominently feature the soloists; and the fourth movement, the keystone of the arch, the musical and emotional turning point, stands at the center.

But the vessel into which Brahms poured his musical creativity is the text. As a large sacred work, the *Requiem* is unique; for its text is neither liturgical (as in a Mass) nor a poetic meditation on a Biblical narrative (as in an oratorio), but the composer's own compilation of texts from the German Bible and the Apocrypha. Its closest models might therefore be such works as Bach's Cantata 106, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, a funeral piece based on the Bible and chorale texts which Bach may have chosen himself, and Handel's *Messiah*, whose text Charles Jennens compiled from the Old and New Testaments (and which contains the same passages from I Corinthians which Brahms set in the sixth movement of the *Requiem*). The text gives the work a personal aspect unmatched in the realm of sacred music. To find a conception equally unified and self-expressive in the nineteenth century, one must turn away from the

church toward the opera house and Wagner, who wrote his own librettos. As with Wagner, *what* Brahms set is as important as *how* he set it.

Brahms's text for the *Requiem* is intricately constructed from quite disparate sources: the words of the Psalmist are thus juxtaposed with the Sermon on the Mount in the first movement; the second movement brings together the epistles of Peter and James with words from the prophet Isaiah; Psalms dominate movements three and four, but at the end of movement three are words from the Apocrypha; the brief fifth movement links St. John with the Apocrypha and Isaiah; the sixth movement begins with St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews, followed by the passage from his first letter to the Corinthians which figures in the Anglican Office for the Dead, and concluding with an excerpt from the Book of Revelation; only the last movement deals with a single Bible verse: the blessing of the dead comes from Revelation 14:13.

Yet despite the far-ranging choices, the texts are often bound by harmonious images. "Those who bear sorrow" in St. Matthew find their counterpart in "Those who sow with tears" in Psalm 126, and this provides the basis for the first movement with its message of the joy that shall emerge from sorrow. Nevertheless, it is too early in the work for unalloyed happiness; the dark orchestration, with its absence of violins, reminds us that the joy is only promised, it is not yet achieved. Further, the opening text places the work on quite a different plane from the Latin Mass for the Dead (the kind of work which usually bears the title "Requiem"). The Latin Mass begins with a prayer for the eternal rest of the departed; Brahms begins not with a prayer for the dead, but with a promise of consolation for the living. It is only at the end of the work, once the message of redemption has been played out, that Brahms turns his thoughts explicitly to the dead, and here the words from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel ("Blessed are those who bear sorrow") find their reverberation in the Revelation of St. John ("Blessed are the dead").

Similarly, in the second movement, the withering grass of St. Peter calls to Brahms's mind the farmer awaiting the harvest in St. James (the harvest image also recalls the sowing and reaping referred to in the first movement). The words of St. Peter are the gloomiest in the work, and Brahms provides them with some of the darkest music. They are counterbalanced by the nearly untarnished joy of the concluding fugue with its words from Isaiah. But we are still in the early stages of a journey toward true comfort, as Brahms reminds us by his setting of the words "Schmerz" (sorrow) and "Seufzen" (sighing). For even though in context the text says "sorrow and sighing must be gone," the music comes to a halt on those two words, placing the "sorrow and sighing" very much in the present and the fleeing of pain in the future. Both the first and second movements revolve around metaphors of departing in sorrow (death) and returning in joy (resurrection). The opening melody in this movement may be an adaptation of Georg Neumark's chorale "Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten."

The third movement is mainly a setting of Psalm 39, verses four through seven. As the text takes a personal turn ("teach *me* well that *I* must have an end"—the first use of the first-person in the work) Brahms introduces a solo singer. For a long while, the chorus can only echo the baritone's words, as though trying to understand their import. The doubt comes to a head with the question, "Now, Lord, in whom shall I find comfort?" which the chorus answers for itself: "I hope in you." At the end, a mighty fugue on the words "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God" (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1)

reaffirms the hope in God with which the Psalm text concludes. Brahms portrays the hand of God by sustaining a D pedal throughout the fugue, which depicts perfectly a kind of eternal stability.

With the fourth movement, we are at the very gates of Heaven, “the forecourts of the Lord,” in the company of the joyous souls. Even the harmony takes an upward turn at this point: the fourth movement begins in a stunning E-flat major, after the unstinting D major of the third-movement fugue. The disjunction becomes all the more startling as the flute and clarinet sound their opening A-flat, a tritone away from the previous D.

For the soprano solo in the fifth movement, Brahms produced his most subtle compilation of texts and provided them with a setting that is a supreme expression of serenity, warmth, and consolation. (Though he only wrote the music after the premiere, this movement was always part of the overall plan for the work: the text is included in Brahms’s handwritten draft of the libretto.) The opening text, from St. John, assures us that though we now have sorrow, we shall find joy (another parallel to sowing in tears and reaping in joy in the first movement). The anonymous “I” of the text then offers her own experience as a reassuring precedent, using words from Ecclesiasticus: “Look at me: I have, for a brief time, had trouble and labor, and have found great comfort.” Comfort, the central message of the *Requiem*, provides the link to the next lines, from Isaiah: “I will comfort you as one whose mother comforts him.” Each of the three texts is in the first person (“I will see you,” “I...had trouble,” “I will comfort you”), and even though three different speakers offer these words in the scriptures, the soprano sings them as though they have come from one source. We feel as though she speaks, for Brahms, to each of us directly. It is the most intimate and personal moment in the work.

Contained in the sixth movement is a crucial drama: first the chorus despairs, listlessly bewailing its own mortality, its own impermanence. But the baritone, who was the voice of doom in the third movement, now interrupts with a hopeful message, “we shall not all sleep.” As in movement three, the chorus repeats his words, now with a wondrous aura of promise and awe. By the middle of the piece, their excitement can no longer be contained. In a taunting, jeering frenzy they demand, “Death, where is your sting? Hell, where is your victory?” The movement ends with a joyous hymn of praise to the power of God.

(A peculiarity of translation is worth pointing out in this movement: in the original Greek text of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the instrument that heralds the Last Judgment is given as *σάλπιγγα* (*sálpinga*, trumpet). For some reason, Martin Luther rendered this as *Posaune*, “trombone,” in the German version (“trumpet” would be *Trompete* in German). He may have thought that the trombone more accurately reflected the ancient instrument. To English speakers, “the trombone shall sound” seems strange, even humorous. But it is clear that Brahms has the trombone in mind—the trombone section is featured prominently in the setting of those words. Mozart similarly uses a trombone solo in his Requiem for the “*tuba mirum*”—the miraculous horn heralding the Last Judgment. In my translation, I’ve used “horn” at this spot as being somewhat more faithful to the German while avoiding the possibly comic implications of the Last Trombone.)

The work comes full circle in the seventh movement. Not only do its opening words echo those of the first movement, but the continuation of the seventh movement text illuminates the first movement

as well. Further, the rhapsodic melody that the sopranos sing at the opening of the seventh movement takes the melody of the first movement and turns it upside-down (and early in the first movement, the oboe plays the melody of the seventh movement in the minor mode—the allusion is rather buried in the texture, though, and not immediately noticeable). At the beginning of the work, the Psalm spoke of sowing, of reaping, of bearing precious seeds, and of carrying sheaves. Indeed, labor and laborers are a recurring theme throughout the entire work: the farmer waits for precious fruit in the second movement, people store things up vainly in the third movement, and in movement five, the singer speaks of “trouble and labor.” But now, at last, the dead rest from their labors, and they no longer bear the burden either of sheaves or even of their good deeds, these simply follow them into Paradise. Brahms concludes this seventh movement with the same music that ended the first, now rapturously played by the entire orchestra (only the trumpets and timpani are silent), thus fulfilling the promise of joy foreshadowed at the beginning.

Brahms might well have called his composition “A Human Requiem,” for it deals with human concerns and emotions: sorrow, trouble, anxiety, the meaning of life and death, and the hope and promise of a better life to come. Yet, in spite of its transcendent universality, it remains the personal expression of a complex and powerfully creative spirit. The mighty forces of the *Requiem* speak to all humanity with a single voice – that of Brahms himself – and therein lies its power to touch us so deeply.