

## ***A German Requiem* by Johannes Brahms**

### **Program Notes by James Schatzman**

Johannes Brahms was an unlikely candidate to become a world's leading musician. He was born of mostly "peasant stock" into a family legacy of wheelwrights, carpenters and innkeepers.

It all started with Brahms' father, Johann Jakob who was determined to be a musician. While a teenager, the willful Johann ran away from his home three times trying to find a patron to support his musical ambitions, but without success. After his third return home his father, Brahms' grandfather, agreed to support his son's ambition to become an apprentice to the town musician in Heide at the age of fourteen. He learned to play the flute, bugle, and all of the stringed instruments. He was the first Brahms to aspire to music. Upon completing his apprenticeship, Brahms' father then left his home town to go to the nearest large city, Hamburg, to make his living. He got most of his work as a double bass player but made a very meager living playing for local entertainments. The Brahms family lived in the poorest section of Hamburg in a run-down old apartment on a street commonly known as "Adulterer's Walk." The family could not support itself on his musical salary and his mother eventually opened a haberdashery to assist with the family finances.

Johannes was the second of three children, with an older sister and a younger brother. Surrounded by music from his infancy, Johann Jakob began teaching his son to play the violin and cello at the age of four. He was sent to a private school where at the age of six he quickly learned to read French and English. He also had a strict religious training where he began to cultivate a deep appreciation of the German chorale. After three years of stubborn insistence – sounds a lot like his willful and determined father to me! - Johannes was allowed to stop practicing the violin and allowed to take piano lessons with a local teacher. He progressed quickly as a pianist. He was so good, in fact, that he was recruited to tour the USA as a "wunderkind." Thankfully, Brahms' teacher talked his father out of the scheme, even though he had already sold his wife's business at a loss to fund the trip! As an appeasement Brahms' piano teacher, talked to the renowned local pianist and composer, Eduard Marxsen to take young Johannes as a student at no cost to the family. This was a turning point for young Brahms. It is here that his skills as one of Europe's best young pianists began to thrive. It is also where his desire to compose could get the tutoring it needed to develop. Johannes Brahms was now on the way to becoming one of Germany's most celebrated musicians.

It was also at this time that the young Johannes helped contribute to his family's income by playing the piano at bars and brothels in the port city where sailors, loose women and drinking were part of his daily exposure. One can safely assume that this was not the best place for a teenaged boy to learn about the "birds and the bees!" This may be why Brahms struggled throughout his life to be comfortable around the women he loved. Although he occasionally wrote of his deep loneliness he died an avowed bachelor, purposely dedicating himself to a life of composition despite the fact that he had many opportunities for suitors.

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More and more, Brahms' piano playing and his compositional technique began to grow. He was acknowledged by Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt, the two greatest pianists of their generation, as a gifted pianist and composer. Clara's husband, composer and pianist Robert Schumann became his friend and mentor and once said, "let him once grasp his magic wand and work with orchestra and chorus!" Later, Clara stated she felt this prophecy was fulfilled during her first hearing of the German Requiem.

There has been much conjecture about why he focused on a requiem at this time. Brahms's mother died in February 1865, a loss that caused him much grief and may well have inspired *Ein deutsches Requiem*. Brahms's lingering feelings over Robert Schumann's death in July 1856 may also have been fuel for his second major orchestral work. With Brahms' reluctance to clearly state his intentions about the Requiem we cannot be certain about this aspect of his motivation, but the illness of his mentor and the loss of his mother so close together clearly shook the young man. Interestingly, the second movement includes some previously abandoned musical material written in 1854, the year of Schumann's mental collapse and attempted suicide, and of Brahms's move to Düsseldorf to assist Clara Schumann and her young children. To me, all of this helps to make the case that this requiem might have been part of a larger, cathartic artistic expression.

Brahms's *Requiem* was completed in August 1866. It was one of his very first major orchestral works. He had written the Piano Concerto in D minor six years earlier, but at the time it was still considered unusually dark, confusing and enigmatic to most audiences, although it would gradually come to be more accepted. At this time Brahms had no distinctive orchestral successes. He was still ten years away from premiering his first symphony. He was rightly nervous about the premiere. Johannes Herbeck conducted the first three movements in Vienna on December 1, 1867. It did not go well due to a misunderstanding with the timpanist who played *fff* throughout the third movement, effectively drowning out the chorus and confusing Brahms' intentions for this movement. The first performance of the six original movements was given in the Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday 1868 with the composer conducting. This was a triumph! Brahms showed himself to be an excellent conductor, the chorus was expertly prepared and the orchestra responded beautifully. This performance is a critical the turning point in his career from a young man with potential to master composer. His creativity, inventiveness and compositional innovation were all on full display and it was fully appreciated by many in the audience and some of the critics. It was nearly impossible to deny that he had arrived as a composer. At the request of his teacher (Marxsen) he decided to add a seventh movement, which became the fifth movement, *Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit*, for soprano and chorus in May of that year. This addition clearly strengthened the overall effect and may have served as an "homage" to his own mother. The work was then published and given in its final version on February 18, 1869 in Leipzig. In the next few years it was to be performed throughout Europe. Leopold Damrosch led the first complete US performance in New York, on March 15, 1877.

Brahms composed the libretto himself. Instead of using the traditional Latin Requiem Mass Brahms' text is derived from the Luther Bible, more like the German Requiem of

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Heinrich Schutz (1585-1672), a work he surely knew and respected. Brahms viewed the German Bible as a national treasure. Although Brahms did not view himself as a traditional Christian, he knew the German Bible well and he deeply appreciated its cultural and literary significance. He set its texts for choral programs at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien where he led many public programs over his conducting career. It seems clear to me by the texts he selected that Brahms' intention is not to write a mass for the dead but a musical offering to bring comfort the living – and maybe, in particular, to himself. As a result, some of the earliest commentators and even some of his closest friends were puzzled by the requiem's lack of overt liturgical context and its distinct lack of references to Jesus and the resurrection. It seems clear to me that for Brahms this was a "humanist" rather than a liturgical work – a work for the masses and not for the Mass.

Brahms's first reference to *Ein deutsches Requiem* was in an 1865 letter to Clara Schumann in which he wrote that he intended the piece to be "eine Art deutsches Requiem" (a sort of German Requiem). Brahms was quite moved when he found out years later that Robert Schumann had planned a work of the same name. Brahms told Carl Martin Reinthaler, director of music at the Bremen Cathedral, that he would have gladly called the work "Ein menschliches Requiem" (A human Requiem).

As such, Brahms' Requiem focuses on the living, beginning with the text "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." from the Beatitudes. A theme of transition from anxiety to comfort recurs in all the following movements except movements 4 and 7, the central one and the final one. Although the idea that the Lord is the source of the comfort is implied by the texts he selected, a sympathetic humanism seems to persist through the entire work.

There was much early criticism by German clergy, and confusion by audiences who expected a mass for the dead. English critic George Bernard Shaw sent so far as to say, "it could only have come from the establishment of a first-class undertaker." Despite some of this early criticism and confusion the German Requiem has become one of the most deeply loved requiems in western musical literature. It is now in the repertoire of every major symphony orchestra and the version you are hearing today is being enjoyed by choirs and audiences all over the world as more and more people experience the unique blessing of this significant choral offering.

Today's alternative version of the Requiem was prepared by Brahms to be performed as a piano duet with four hands. The piano duet accompaniment is based on an 1866 arrangement for piano of the six-movement version of the Requiem, which Brahms to sent to Clara Schumann to introduce the work to her. This version was used for the first complete British performance of the Requiem on 10 July 1871 in London, at the home of Sir Henry Thompson and his wife, pianist Kate Loder (Lady Thompson). It was conducted by his friend Julius Stockhausen. This version of the Requiem is sometimes referred to as the "London Version." It was sung in English translation that is now lost, and was presented with approximately 30 singers. This unique chamber version has the ability to reveal a different layer of the genius of Johannes Brahms. In many ways, a

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chamber presentation of the *Requiem* provides opportunities for textual clarity and musical nuance often obscured by large-scale performances. It presents a surprising transparency that allows the choral writing to take a more prominent place in this remarkable score. It also creates a surprising intimacy with the text, especially in the fifth movement. Brahms' skillful piano writing makes this arrangement every bit as convincing as the orchestral score and in some ways more revealing in a texture that is more buoyant and supple. The arrangement for two players allows a degree of intimacy, precision and contrapuntal clarity that cannot be achieved in the orchestral version. At times one is reminded of the *Liebeslieder Waltzes* op. 52, written only one year later for performances in more intimate parlor settings.

This version gradually fell out of favor until about a decade ago when chamber choirs in Europe and in the US began re-appreciating the intimacy, textual and textural clarity this version offered. It has been given some remarkable performances and is now available in recording from several professional choirs, including Harry Christophers and the Sixteen. This arrangement is not simply a "cheap" alternative for those who can't afford an orchestra, but a version with a "different artistic sensibility."

The *Requiem* is the composition that made Brahms a beloved composer and set him on a course to be known around the musical world. It is this arrangement that is making the *Requiem* more accessible to an even larger audience and offering a clarity of purpose not easily accomplished with the larger forces of a modern symphony orchestra and a chorus of 150-200 voices.

Although Brahms wrote this early in his career and before all of his symphonies it is viewed by most scholars as his quintessential masterpiece of his large scale works. I, for one, am inclined to agree.

It is our privilege to present this glorious music for you today!