



Ein deutsches Requiem

Johannes Brahms

by Dr. Nick Strimple | Scholar in Residence

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In 1854, moved by the suicide attempt of Robert Schumann, his friend and mentor, Johannes Brahms sketched a multi-movement work whose dimensions were larger than anything he had yet written. But what, exactly, was it? A symphony? A concerto? Brahms put the sketches away, apparently knowing that he would have need of them at a later date.

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In 1856 Schumann died. Brahms may have considered writing a memorial work for Schumann at this time; still, he incorporated most of the 1854 sketches into his first piano concerto instead. But when Brahms's mother died in 1865, the thought of a memorial work again filled his mind and he began selecting texts from Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible, arranging them in a manner reminiscent of earlier funerary works by Heinrich Schütz and J. S. Bach. He completed the first and fourth movements rather quickly, and arranged his remaining 1854 sketch into the second movement of this large, majestic and solemn composition. During the next eighteen months he completed three more movements. It was in this six movement form that *Ein deutsches Requiem* received its first two performances in 1868, performances so well received that Brahms approved the Requiem's publication later the same year. Critical response was also exceptionally favorable. One English critic called it "the greatest achievement of modern sacred music in Germany".

However, still sensing that something was missing, Brahms added the famous fifth movement (in memory of his mother) before a performance in Leipzig in February 1869. (The American composer Morten Lauridsen owns a copy of the first edition which has the fifth movement, in manuscript, sewn into it). This additional movement not only seals the overall symmetry of the work while creating a smoother sequence of



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keys moving back to the original tonic, but it also focuses the listener's attention on the element of comfort. While the idea of comfort permeates the fifth movement's text, Brahms achieves the necessary focus primarily through use of a soprano soloist, who is otherwise not heard during the Requiem. Brahms was not conventionally religious and, at best, he had serious doubts about an afterlife. So it is clear that those for whom Brahms is seeking comfort are not the dead, as in a Roman Catholic Missa pro defunctis, but rather the living.

Brahms's art was essentially rooted in the music of past masters. All of his small sacred pieces are in some way exercises in antique forms: prelude and fugue, variations, augmentation canons, and so on. Further, none of his small religious works - with the exception of a few German folksong settings, which are simply arrangements of preexisting material - contain any Christological text. These traits carry over into the Requiem. The third and sixth movements end with great fugues; while the second, third and fourth movements contain contrapuntal writing of such expanse and complication as to border on full scale fugues. Even the musical notation of the second and fourth movement fugues, in half-note pulse, harkens back to the age of Schütz. There is, likewise, a studied avoidance of Christology in the Requiem. We, accustomed to hearing performances in English, are usually unaware that the familiar "at the coming of Christ" is not a direct translation of Luther's German, which clearly states "at the coming of the Lord." This avoidance of anything specifically Christian in his religious works was, in fact, an instigating factor in the investigation of Brahms by Nazi musicologists in the 1930s, out of fear that he might actually be Jewish. Other reasons for suspicion rested on his choice of friends, many of whom were Jews; condemnation by Richard Wagner, who called him a "Jewish czardas player"; and his unusual surname, which the Nazis saw as a possible abbreviation of "Abraham". These



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musicologists happily gave up their pursuit when they discovered a small village called Brahm, in close proximity to Brahms's hometown of Hamburg, which raised the possibility that his ancestors had simply adopted the village name as their own when they moved into the city.

While most listeners have never been particularly concerned with Brahms's choice of text or use of old fashioned musical rhetoric, the Requiem still has had its detractors, most notably the great Irish writer George Bernard Shaw, who, among other things, thought that no one should have to hear *Ein deutsches Requiem* more than once, and then only as punishment. Shaw's view has not prevailed. As we proceed further and further into a secular age, this masterwork, which is comforting rather than dogmatic, seems to speak to more and more people. It honors the dead and strengthens the mourners. Possibly because of its mastery of solid, easily identifiable formal structures, it engenders a sense of order. And for those who are neither secular nor suffering personal loss, it reveals a certain hope that cannot be articulated in religious platitudes. It is no accident that *Ein deutsches Requiem* is performed regularly throughout the world: it connects people.