

PROGRAM NOTES

The passing of Robert Schumann in 1856, who had been an early mentor and champion of the young Johannes Brahms, left the latter feeling quite alone and greatly saddened by the loss of an influential and supportive colleague. Moved to pay homage in some fashion, the younger composer sketched some themes which he thought he might incorporate into a memorial symphony. One theme eventually became that of the second movement of his *Ein deutsches Requiem*, but this was not to happen immediately. In the fall of 1861, Brahms composed a four-movement cantata incorporating the aforementioned single movement, but ran into difficulty and temporarily shelved the project.

Then, on the Second of February, 1865, Johannes Brahms received an urgent telegram from his brother Fritz in Hamburg: "If you want to see our mother once again, come immediately." Despite the composer's best efforts, his mother passed away before he could reach her bedside. This loss, plus the depth of love Brahms had harbored for his mother throughout his life, affected him greatly. But as is so often the case with artists stricken with adversity, the event became a positive impetus which moved the composer to revisit his dormant cantata, and to add to it two movements, creating a Requiem of six movements. On Good Friday 1868, Brahms conducted the provisional first performance of the entire work in the Cathedral of Bremen, but without the fifth movement, which was planned, but not yet written. Soon after this premiere, and, it has been suggested, shortly after visiting the graveside of his mother, Brahms began work on an aria for soprano solo in dialogue with chorus, which includes the text from Isaiah, "I will comfort you, as one's own mother comforts one." This touching memorial to the composer's mother would ultimately complete the large seven-movement work for chorus, soloists, and orchestra we know today as *Ein deutsches Requiem*. On February 18, 1869, the work was heard in its entirety in the Leipzig Gewandhaus under the direction of Carl Reinecke. And from that moment, the work has been fully embraced and beloved by performers and listeners.

Despite the long gestation of this remarkable work – some thirteen years – *Ein deutsches Requiem* exhibits an ingenious structure and inexorable flow. Beginning with somber and dark, violin-less string color with divided 'celli and violi underpinned by *Kontrabassi* and organ pedal, the first movement for chorus and orchestra gives moments of radiance and light to the chorus, woodwinds, and harp only at moments where the text mentions joy (*Freude*) and comfort (*getröstet*).

The second movement begins with a portentous, muted strings and harp-colored ever-descending minor-mode theme, immediately answered but not fully offset by a rising and arpeggiated figure which tellingly pitches its final note

downward. This compound effect leaves the listener in a state of suspense, awaiting a resolution of some sort. Instead, Brahms offers a dark and foreboding funeral march for unison chorus, reminding us that all humankind is as the grass of the field, the flower of which ultimately withers and dies. An extraordinary change of mood occurs as the text suggests patience while awaiting the ultimate coming of the Lord. When the text offers the metaphorical image of a farmer tending his precious crops, patiently awaiting revivifying rain, Brahms creates a gentle instrumental illustration of morning and evening showers. As we are chastened once again to be patient, the somber march which began this movement returns and grows to almost terrifying intensity. When no more intensity can be borne, the chorus bursts out with “*Aber, des Herrn Wort bleibet in Ewigkeit*” (BUT – the word of the Lord endures forever), which leads to a great and robust chorus in which eternal joy (*ewige Freude*) becomes the focus. Ten of the final measures are permeated with ennobling rising scales, as if providing radiant optimism in the face of all the sobriety which came before.

A Baritone solo begins movement three, prayerfully imploring the Lord for counsel. In dialogue with the chorus, the soloist comments on the relative negligibility of human existence and how ultimately futile is a life of gathering possessions. Greatly agitated arpeggios for the chorus ponder a question of great import: if this is so, in whom might one take comfort? The answer, floated first by æthereally rising choral triplets, then answered broadly by ringing brass, is “*Ich hoffe auf DICH*” (I put my hope in THEE). The ensuing double fugue, one each for orchestra and chorus, with their tonalities firmly rooted in a 35-measure long pedal point on D, affirm that righteous souls are in the hand of God, and no torment shall affect them.

The pastoral and optimistic fourth movement acts as balm to the severity of the prior three as its text contemplates how beautiful are those places in which the spirit of the Lord and the spirits of departed souls dwell together.

The fifth movement for Soprano solo and chorus is the music Brahms wrote for his mother, and its “fit” at this point in a work in which much had been written earlier, is one of the many wonders of this score. Muted strings present a short and gentle introduction which at its end has the unmistakable feel of a lullaby as the melody rocks back and forth just prior to the soloist’s entrance. Here Brahms presents a remarkable synthesis of three Biblical texts, and gives the soprano a narrative role: from *John 16:22* – “...Ye now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man can take from you;” from *Isaiah 66:13* – “I will comfort you as one whom his mother comforteth;” and from *Ecclesiasticus 51:35* – “Behold me with your eyes: a little while I have had tribulation and labor, and have found great comfort.” This ingenious juxtaposition tells several stories, but the two most pertinent are the tale of comfort found after tribulation, and most tellingly, that of Brahms’s mother speaking directly to him

with these words, providing solace to her son, even after her passing. If this invention were not enough of an emotional tug, the exquisite intertwining of the soprano with the chorus, the latter fervently repeating “I will comfort you, as one’s mother comforteth” leaves one in a state of tender awe.

The contrast afforded by the ensuing sixth movement could not be more dramatic. Spectral harmonies precede and then accompany the chorus as it tells how here on earth there can be no abiding existence, only that which is sought in the future, after our lives are past, can prevail. The Baritone soloist returns, now also in a narrative role, to tell of the mystery of the foretold Last Judgement, when the dead of the world are raised up, and all is forever changed (*verwandelt*). Brahms shows himself a true dramatist here, and his skill with creating a mood of spooky anticipation is palpable. The soloist tells of the trumpet of judgment day as promised by the scriptures, and the chorus leaps aboard the concept for the wild ride of description which follows. Over and over, Hell is queried: *where* is thy victory? Death, *where* is thy sting? Near the end of this turbulent section, with great impact, the chorus defiantly (and rhetorically) demands three times, each time followed by a dramatic pause, “*wo?*” – WHERE? A noble fugue follows, perhaps the finest in the work. Twice in its progress to its mighty conclusion, the orchestra climbs to its heights and then tumbles to its depths with the text “Thou art worthy to receive praise, and honor, and power.” The final triumphant C-major chord, marked (only) *forte*, but with a double-long whole note with *fermata*, caps one of the great moments in the choral repertoire.

The feel of a majestic autumnal afternoon fills the final movement of *Ein deutsches Requiem*, in which the fires of the earlier music are banked and the anxieties of dread and loss are allayed. Of this music, program note annotator Mark Rohr has written:

A beatitude opened *Ein deutsches Requiem*, and another closes it. “Blessed are they that mourn” began a first movement full of uncertainty; “Blessed are the dead which die in the name of the Lord” is the last movement’s affirmation of faith. The long journey from bereavement to consolation proceeds with a force of logic that is overpowering.

And indeed, as the final music of this remarkable work approaches its conclusion, Brahms revisits some of the same music with which he began the work, but the text here at the conclusion, in fact the work’s final word, now speaks not only of comfort, but of its transfiguration into blessedness, a state attained only within the final and gentle embrace of God.

~Program Notes © 2003 by John W. Ehrlich