Johannes Brahms (1833–1897): *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (Op. 45) (1869)

What we have heard today is a great and beautiful work, deep and intense in feeling, ideal and lofty in conception. Yes, one may call it an epoch-making work. (Karl Reinthaler, after conducting the premiere of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* in Bremen Cathedral, Good Friday, April 10th 1868)

It was such a joy as I have not felt for a long time. (Clara Schumann, Journal entry, April 10th 1868)

...one of those works in which the 19th century recognised its own identity. (Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 1989)

Brahms may have conceived his *Requiem* in the manner of Schubert's German masses, in setting a series of vernacular texts from the Lutheran bible rather than the Latin Requiem. This may explain also the full, almost pedantic title of *A German Requiem according to the Words of Holy Scripture, for Soli (Soprano and Bass) Choir and Orchestra (organ ad lib.)* under which it was first published in full by Rieter Biedermann in 1869. The selected scriptural texts all deal with aspects of death, but not in ways necessarily requiring liturgical performance. Brahms was still a practising Lutheran at the time of writing the work, but it has been variously suggested that it was intended initially as a memorial to Robert Schumann, his friend and benefactor, who died in 1856, and also to his mother, who died in 1865 when he was already working on it. Certainly, his grief then made him determined to complete it, yet it continues to be regarded oxymoronically as an humanist mass, a view reinforced by Brahms's insistence that its innate themes of melancholy and consolation are applicable to many occasions and intended for all humanity.

Rather than as a commemorative Mass for the dead it seems that Brahms conceived the work as a resource for comfort and hope to the living and bereaved, by celebrating the believer's ultimate triumph over the pain of death through faith in continuing life. The dead are not

referred to directly until the penultimate movement, and even then specifically in terms of the resurrection myth, as reawakened free of sin and raised incorruptible. More prosaically, and perhaps anticipating his own later agnosticism, he wrote to Clara Schumann after his mother's death: "There is nothing to be altered, nothing to regret for a sensible man. It is simply a matter of carrying on and keeping one's head above water". Brahms had promised Clara a vocal score for Christmas 1866 and she duly received a manuscript of what he then regarded as the complete work, though it lacked the soprano solo movement, which was not finished until late in May 1868. In her letter of thanks for the initial version of the pianoforte accompaniment, dated December 30th, she wrote that it had given her 'unspeakable joy'.

Brahms knew from the outset that the *Requiem* would be difficult to perform, not least because of the incorporation of traditional elements, such as counterpoint, with a modern-sounding modulation and rhythmic structure. The first three movements were performed initially at a semi private concert in Vienna on December 1st 1867 before an audience more familiar with Brahms as a producer of Baroque choral works. The radically different, Romantic character of this new music was the subject of much critical debate and played a decisive role in the division of critics into the 'Brahms vs Wagner' camps that were later to become so crucial to the interpretation of both composers' music. Wagner's attitude to Brahms is documented in his outrage at Brahms's claim to have written a truly German work, remarking famously that, when his own generation died, "we will want no *German Requiem* to be played to our ashes".

Nevertheless, Brahms's growing reputation led to an offer of a first performance of the work, though still without the fifth movement, from one of his major supporters, Karl Reinthaler, in Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday 1868. Brahms's initial hesitance at accepting was dispelled by the invitation to conduct and by attending several choral rehearsals in January and February, for which he made the difficult journey from Hamburg, often in bad weather. The performance was before a huge audience of 2,500, including Clara Schumann and an English music educationist, John Farmer, then employed at Harrow School and probably responsible for the first London performance. It was an

outstanding success, and established Brahms's reputation as a major composer – though the cathedral authorities, concerned at the lack of any reference to the Passion and Redemption of Christ, had to be mollified by inclusion in the programme of 'Erbarme dich' from Bach's *St Matthew Passion* and 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' from Handel's *Messiah*.

The full seven-movement version was first performed in Leipzig on February 18th 1869, to a cool reception belied by 20 further performances in the same year in most major German cities. It was subsequently first performed in Vienna in 1871, Berlin, St Petersburg and Utrecht in 1872, though not until 1875 in Paris, because of the Franco-Prussian War, which Brahms had celebrated remuneratively in his *Triumphlied (op.55)*. It was premiered privately in London in July 1871, for which Brahms arranged the orchestral score for piano duet, insisting that the work should be sung in the language of the audience. Though sung in German, it is to this piano score that the work will be performed this evening. The English public premiere, with full orchestral score and chorus, was at a Philharmonic concert at St James's Hall, London, in April 1873.

The first chorus begins in a fittingly sombre mood which underpins the entire first movement – a strategy Brahms used again to open his setting of Schiller's *Nanie*. The possibility of joy is suggested with a hint, almost, of majesty as basses and tenors swing quickly into brighter expression on 'Die mit Tränen säen, werden mit Freuden ernten'. It closes, nevertheless, with a return to the quiet solemnity of its opening, and the clear implication that the human plight remains one of hope about the future, rather than faith in its certainty.

The second movement is introduced by the chorus in unison to a funereal march, lightened briefly with an almost waltz-like interjection from the female voices on 'Das Gras ist verdorret…', echoing phrases from the *Liebeslieder.* A more sustained, lighter interlude intervenes for all parts at 'So seid nun geduldig…' until the re-assertion, *forte*, of the opening phrase is followed by a surprising change in key, character and tempo, marked 'Un poco sostenuto' on 'Die Erlöseten des Herrn…',

(another strategy that Brahms uses again in *Nanie*) as basses lead off in a series of rapid sequences until the quiet *diminuendo* on which the movement concludes.

The bass soloist's prayer begins the third movement, joined by the chorus in an increasingly pessimistic litany of the transitoriness and insignificance of human life, until soloist and chorus echo one another in the question: 'Nun, Herr, wes soll ich mich trösten?' The response, 'Ich hoffe auf dich…', builds from *piano* to *forte* as prelude to the tenors' brisk, bright commencement of an optimistic fugue on a text from the Wisdom of Solomon (3.1): 'Der Gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes Hand, und keine Qual rühret sie an', assuring the righteous of their safety from pain and grief in divine hands. The surprise is deliberate, and moves to a grandeur which marks a key point of transition in the work as a whole, from the sole resort of hope in the opening movement to this strong and assertive commitment to faith in divine providence.

The chorus now consolidates the sense of security reached in the previous movement, with the anticipation of a heavenly afterlife in the 'lovely dwelling place' of the 'Lord Almighty'. This movement has since been arranged to become a popular Protestant anthem in its own right, yet was described by Brahms in a letter to Clara of April 1865, as 'probably the weakest part' – perhaps a result of his anxiety about some need for relief after the intensity of the preceding movements. Its lyrical charm contrasts with their more sombre tones, echoing the delightful line and harmony of Schubert's last Mass, no. 6 in E flat, for which Brahms had recently been commissioned by Rieter-Biedermann to make a vocal score. Its lightness of texture deepens gently with the short, concluding double fugue, on 'die loben dich immerdar'.

The fifth movement was the last to be written and is the basis for assertions that the work was an expression of Brahms's grief at his mother's death. Certainly, both the opening soprano solo, and following choral passage: 'Ich will euch trösten, wie einen seine Mutter tröstet', support such claims. It moves ethereally to its radiant close as the soprano insists softly: 'Ich will euch wieder sehen', gently sustained by the chorus: 'Ich will euch trösten'.

The sixth movement begins, in an almost martial *andante*, with a series of triads by the chorus in simple four-part style, introducing the baritone recitative: 'Siehe, ich sage euch ein Geheimnis' in a direct echo of Handel's setting of the same text in *Messiah* for 'The trumpet shall sound', and continuing until the announcement of the last trump itself ('der Zeit letzen Posaune'). The chorus then launch, *vivace*, into a rousing celebration of change and resurrection followed, after a further brief baritone solo, by a repeated challenge to the sting of death and the victory of the grave. Finally, altos begin the double fugue, 'Herr, du bist würdig zu nehmen Preis und Ehre und Kraft…', which is developed to a majestic conclusion.

The sopranos establish the structural unity of the work by commencing the final movement in a thematic echo of its beatitudinous opening ('Selig sind…'), but now *forte*, with a blessing for those who die in faith rather than for those who mourn. This brings consolation to the bereaved through remembrance of the lives and works of the departed, rather than through transcendent faith in the divine. The sombre opening mood changes subtly into a rhythmic, restful interweaving of voices on 'Ja, der Geist spricht, dass sie ruhen von ihrer Arbeit…' until the work draws calmly to a close, in the rapture of its opening lines.

Paul Filmer
March 2022

Richard Strauss (1864–1949): Four Songs

Strauss was a prolific composer of lieder, concluding a tradition which had emerged late in the eighteenth century with relatively simple compositions and had evolved throughout the nineteenth century into increasingly complex and diverse works. He is an acknowledged master of the genre, and *Zueignung* and *Allerseelen* are respectively the first and last compositions of his first mature collection, *Opus 10* (1885), of eight settings of poems by Hermann von Gilm. The set is marked *Fur hohe Singstimme*, and Strauss is on record as describing them as 'real tenor songs'! He composed more often, however, with his wife in mind - Pauline de Alma, whom he married in 1895, and who was the source of his

preference for the soprano voice. He made later settings of both poems for her. An interesting paradox of the lieder tradition is the mediocrity of so much of the poetry to which the music is set, and which is thereby given a reputation which it seldom merits on its own terms. Gilm's work is no exception, yet it is with these settings that Strauss seems to have hit on the 'formula' which makes his songs so distinctive. He ignored the verse form of the poetry itself, through-composing the songs into an emergent whole of words and music, a new and autonomous entity which became far more than the sum of its parts. Thus, the modish and often over-elaborated ambiguities of Gilm's popular verse are transformed into an intimate lyricism through ingenious twists of melody and harmonic direction in *Zueignung*, for example, as Strauss builds the emotional intensity to an explosive expression of gratitude at the cleansing and purification that devotion can bring.

Cäcilie and *Morgen* are the second and last in the set of four songs (Opus 27) that Strauss wrote in 1894 and presented as a wedding gift to Pauline on the eve of their marriage, September 9th. The first sets a love poem, written by the German drama critic and journalist Heinrich Hart (1855–1906) for his wife, Cecily. Hart was a pioneer of literary naturalism, though this effusive verse is more traditionally romantic in character. *Morgen* is one of Strauss's best known works, and was recorded three times by the composer. It sets another love poem, this by John Henry Mackay (1864–1933) who was born in Greenock to a German mother and a Scottish father, but was brought up in Germany. A prominent member of a revolutionary German literary movement led by the anti-Prussian socialist Karl Henckell (1864–1929), he was best known for his radical, anarcho-socialist novels: this poem suggests a rather different side to his writing!

Paul Filmer, March 2022

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897): Geistliches Lied Op.30 (1864)

Brahms composed this 'Spiritual Song' in 1856, during a series of weekly exchanges of contrapuntal studies with his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, who thought the work 'on the whole very beautiful'. It was the only one of the studies Brahms eventually, eight years later, thought fit for publication. First performed in 1865, scored for four-part mixed chorus accompanied by organ or

piano, it is widely regarded as a demonstration of Brahms's mastery of contrapuntal writing. He marked the autograph score: 'Double canon at the ninth'; in the first canon, tenors imitate sopranos, in the second, basses imitate altos, and in both cases at the interval of the ninth.

The text is itself the ninth of the seventeenth-century German writer Paul Flemming's simple, devotional odes ('Geistliche Lieder') and Brahms organises the canons in the first and third verses to coincide on the third line of text: in the first verse 'Sei stille!' (Be calm), in the third 'Steh Feste!' (Be steadfast). Brahms's gentle, lyrical setting is in an appropriately soft dynamic, for the most part *piano* until a crescendo at the beginning of the concluding, extended Amen. Its lyrical serenity suggests a consoling, stoic fatalism for the grieving characteristic also heard in *A German Requiem*. It formed part of a birthday present for Clara Schumann in 1860 and may have been intended to console her in coping with her husband Robert's illness.

Paul Filmer, March 2022