

## PROGRAM NOTE – *Bravo Brahms*

Besides being a successful composer, pianist, and conductor, Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was known for his melancholy which he both struggled with and embraced. Many of Brahms' works explore existential themes, but the choral-orchestral works featured today form two of his strongest statements regarding the fate of humanity. While these pieces were originally conceived for chorus and orchestra, today's performance features transcriptions for piano duo which Brahms created himself (*The German Requiem*) or supervised and approved (*Schicksalslied*).

The *Schicksalslied* ["Song of Fate"] was premiered in 1871 with the composer conducting. Brahms began his work on the piece during the summer of 1868 after being inspired by a reading of "Hyperion's *Schicksalslied*," a poetic excerpt of Friedrich Hölderlin's 1797 novel *Hyperion oder Der Eremit in Griechenland* ["Hyperion or The Hermit in Greece"]. The first two stanzas speak of the gods' tranquil repose above, and Brahms set the stage for the text with an extended orchestral prelude that exudes the light, bliss, and calm of the heavenly beings. However, underneath this blissful music, lies an insistent, throbbing pulse which also is found in the second movement of *The German Requiem*, a movement which speaks of the inevitability of death. After the prelude of the *Schicksalslied*, the chorus sings of the gods' blissful life. The third stanza, however, makes an abrupt shift to the fate of mortals, who "fall headlong ... as water thrown from cliff to cliff." In setting this poetic contrast, Brahms shifts to a fast triple meter marked by roiling arpeggios in the accompaniment which supports a unison choral melody that leaps about tumultuously. Twice, sharp choral cross-rhythms cut against the metrical grain, vividly portraying the crashing waves. Eventually, the chaos subsides, and the music of the opening prelude returns to bring the *Schicksalslied* to a peaceful close.

*Ein Deutsches Requiem* ["A German Requiem"] was the composition which launched Brahms to the forefront of the musical world of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It is plausible that two events triggered the composition. First, Robert Schumann, a fellow composer, friend, and mentor who Brahms loved dearly, died in 1854 after a long struggle with mental illness. Second, Brahms' mother died in 1865. Two months after the death of his mother Brahms finished the first, second, and fourth movements and even sent this later movement to Clara Schumann as part of "a sort of German requiem." Not only had Brahms started to pen some of his most beloved music, but he had searched the pages of his Lutheran Bible for texts he wanted to employ in his contemplation of human suffering and Brahms' search for comfort. Brahms' mastery is not only found in the music of each movement but the way in which he combined what may appear to be disparate texts into a cohesive story of hope. Brahms told Karl Reinthaler, director of music at the Bremen cathedral, "...as far as the text is concerned, I confess that I would very gladly omit the 'German' and simply put 'Human.' Indeed, not only does this piece break from the traditional Roman Catholic Latin text of a requiem, but also from the traditional intent of a prayer for the dead. Through *A German Requiem* Brahms gives the listener messages of hope and long-suffering patience for those who are living and are faced with mortality.

The mirror structure of *A German Requiem* is quite evident in the ordering and construction of the seven movements. The similarity of the opening and closing movements serves to unify the whole work, while the funeral-march of the second is balanced by the triumphant theme in the towering sixth movement. Similarly, the baritone solo in the third movement, "Lord, make me to know" is paralleled in the fifth by the soprano solo, "Ye now are sorrowful." The lyrical fourth section, "How lovely are all thy dwellings fair", is therefore at the heart of the work, framed by the solemnity of the first three movements and the transition from grief to the certainty of comfort in the last three.

The opening movement, the text of which is one of the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, begins in a hushed and somber mood, underpinned by a consistent pulse. As the music proceeds, however, mourning is transformed into rejoicing before returning to the opening beatitude.

The second movement, in the dark key of B-flat minor, is centered on the heavy rhythms of a funeral march, with the chorus proclaiming the inevitability of man's fate, "Behold, all flesh is as the grass." A lighter central episode provides a brief respite before the funeral march returns. Eventually, this march is interrupted by the text "But yet the Lord's word standeth for evermore." This interruption leads to an energetic and concluding allegro which once more transfigures darkness into light.

In the third movement, the baritone soloist and chorus begin by pondering the transience of human existence. The soloist then asks, "Now, Lord what do I wait for?" and the reply, "My hope is in thee", wells up from the depths in a rising crescendo of affirmation. This leads seamlessly into a broad, imposing fugue, remarkable for its omnipresent pedal D which, whilst creating considerable tension during the fugue itself, also provides an unshakable foundation for the final resolution.

The centerpiece of a fourth movement is a serene *pastorale* which provides the opportunity for contemplation and rest. This is music of exceptional beauty, and it is hardly surprising that this movement is so widely known and cherished.

The fifth movement features a sublime soprano solo accompanied by the chorus. Whereas the baritone soloist in the third movement sang of grief and doubt, the soprano's message here in one of maternal consolation and comfort.

Brahms reserves his most dramatic music for the imposing sixth movement. It begins in a reflective mood, but soon the baritone soloist introduces the familiar verses "We shall not all slumber, but we shall all be changed ... at the sounding of the last trumpet," at which point the music explodes into a blaze of sound and energy. The intensity builds up until the question "Hades, where is thy sting?" which is answered by silence and then the unfolding of a majestic concluding fugue.

The last movement begins with a radiant melody from the sopranos, followed by the basses. The moving final section is a subtle reworking of music from the very opening, and *A German Requiem* reaches its peaceful conclusion at the same word with which it began: "Blessed."

Given the weight and importance of the text of *A German Requiem* it has been a conscientious choice to perform the work in English. While this decision serves to deliver the text with immediacy directly to the audience, the use of an English translation is not without historical merit. In 1871, *A German Requiem* was given its English premiere in a private performance at the London residence of the noted surgeon and polymath Sir Henry Thompson. Not only was the piece sung in an English translation which unfortunately has been lost, but this performance made use of the duo piano transcription which Brahms had carefully crafted himself. Both the translation to English and the creation of a piano duet version of the piece were common practices of the era in order to aid the dissemination of this new music. The English translation heard in today's performance is carefully prepared by Michael Pilkington from various English translations of the Scriptures. Therefore, to perform the work in this manner is to follow in a long and distinguished tradition that places pragmatism and the desire to communicate above canonicity which is congruent with what we can discern of Brahms' own musical ethos.

*Program Note by Dr. John P. Rakes*