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## A German Requiem, Johannes Brahms

The word “requiem” traditionally refers to the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead, the opening intonation of which begins with the Latin phrase “Requiem aeternam dona eis domine” (“Grant them eternal rest, O Lord”), the first word of the service lending itself as a title to the whole. Many composers, of course, had written settings of the Requiem, but these were liturgical works, settings of the Latin text of the Catholic service, intended for actual use in a service as a prayer for the soul of the deceased. Brahms, however, conceived the extraordinary idea of creating his own text, carefully selecting Biblical passages that would not correspond to the funeral liturgy of any church, but would nonetheless represent a deeply felt response to the central problem of human existence. And to distinguish his work from the Catholic Mass for the Dead, he called it “Ein deutsches Requiem” (“A German Requiem”)

It is not clear where Brahms got the idea for an original non-liturgical choral piece of this sort. His close friend and mentor Robert Schumann left a sketchbook in which he outlined works that he intended someday to compose; One of these contained the title “Ein deutsches Requiem,” and Brahms may well have encountered it when helping Clara Schumann after her husband’s death in July 1856 (though years later he could not recall ever having seen it). Still, Schumann’s death had a powerful impact on the younger man, and he began working on a composition to relieve the melancholy that loomed over him at the loss of his friend.

Already about 1854, long before Brahms had any thought of writing a large choral piece, he had worked on music that he intended to make into a symphony in D minor; eventually it became his First Piano Concerto. One theme originally intended for the aborted symphony and finally rejected, ultimately resurfaced as the beginning of the second movement of the German Requiem, a movement composed between 1857 and 1859. It became part of a larger plan in the fall of 1861, when Brahms included it as part of a planned cantata in four movements for which he worked out the text. But there it remained, without further progress, for four years. Then, on 2 February 1865, Brahms received in Vienna an urgent telegram from his brother Fritz in Hamburg: “If you want to see our mother once again, come immediately.” He went north immediately, but his mother had suffered a stroke, and by the time Johannes arrived, she was no more. This event haunted and depressed him. Typically he turned to creative work to exorcise the thought of death. Within two months he had completed the first, second, and fourth movements of the Requiem. Then Brahms’s heavy concert touring schedule – alone and with the violinist Joachim – intervened. It took until August 1866 to complete the remainder of the work, with the exception of the fifth movement.

By September, Brahms had played the score for Clara Schumann, who was and remained his lifelong confidante and sounding-board. She wrote in her diary

“Johannes has been playing me some magnificent movements out of a Requiem of his own and a string quartet in C minor. The Requiem delighted me even more, however. It is full of tender and again daring thoughts. I cannot feel clear as to how it will sound, but in myself it sounds glorious.”

The Requiem was originally intended to consist of six movements. The first three were performed in Vienna, with Johannes Herbeck conducting, on 1 December 1867, in a concert devoted to the memory of Schubert. The results were equivocal. Some of the audience heartily approved, but most of the Viennese found it too austere for their taste – especially the third movement, which was actually booed (though the fault was partly that of the timpanist, who played so loudly in the extended fugue that he drowned everyone else out).

The entire six-movement work received its first performance under the composer's baton in Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday, 10 April 1868. Here Brahms achieved the first great triumph of his life – and for that reason no doubt the sweetest. But the score was still not finished. Soon after the premier, he added the fifth movement, with soprano solo, which as its text indicates, is clearly a tribute to his mother's memory. The Requiem thus stood finished as we know it today; that version was first heard in Leipzig on 18 February 1869, when Carl Reinecke conducted. In this final form the piece quickly attained the rank of a classic; it was heard in Germany twenty times within the first year.

Brahms himself brilliantly assembled the text of his German Requiem from Luther's translation of the Bible – from the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha. He may have worked partly from memory, since he sometimes departed from details of Luther's words. He was apparently determined to create a universal text, one that would not follow any particular liturgy, and he avoided even any reference to the words “Jesus” or “Christ” (though some English translations of the work undo him in that point). The composer's intention is indicated by a letter he wrote to the director of music at the Bremen Cathedral, where the work had its premiere, in which he explained that “German” referred only to the language in which the work was sung; he would have gladly called it “A Human Requiem.” Brahms is concerned to capture a universal human experience rather than a narrow doctrinal one and to address the living, the bereaved, rather than the dead. The music achieves a symphonic breadth and strength that marks an important turning point in his work, while at the same time underlining the expressive significance of his text. At every point we encounter the classically minded composer, whose power comes not from the theatrical display but rather from carefully balanced control of harmony and rhythm, melody and tone color.

The German Requiem is Brahms's largest work in any medium. Here, for the first time, he not only established himself as a mature composer in the eyes of his contemporaries but also wrote one of those special choral works that singers return to with as much delight as audiences, a unique masterpiece of technique and effect expressing the universal longings of mankind.

