

A German Requiem – Johannes Brahms Program Notes

Two significant deaths provided the necessary stimulus for Johannes Brahms (1833- 1897) to compose *Ein deutsches Requiem*. The first was that of composer and mentor Robert Schumann (d.1854); the second was Brahms' mother (d.1865). Breaking with tradition, this thirty-three year old composer created his unique Requiem. Brahms' frank admission to the director at the Bremen Cathedral where the work premiered in 1867, "*I will admit that I could happily omit the 'German; and simply say 'Human' "*" captures its essence. Brahms chose not to use the traditional liturgical Latin text from the Catholic *Mass of the Dead* as did his German predecessors Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann. Instead, he turned to Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible, selecting texts from both Hebrew and Christian testaments and the Apocrypha that spoke to the bereaved living, not the spiritual destiny of the dead. The words offer comfort, hope and promise. He was determined to create a universal text, one that would not follow any particular theology, avoiding any reference to *Jesus* or *Christ*. This lack of specific "Christian" content caused some disturbance among the Bremen Cathedral authorities, who tried to convince Brahms to imbue the work with a more specifically Christian context, but their suggestions fell on deaf ears. Brahms replied that he had knowingly passed over such passages as John 3:16 and selected others "because I am a musician, because I needed them, and because I cannot dispute or delete a 'from henceforth' from my revered poets." He read the Bible as a collection of experience and wisdom in historical literary form, rather than a defining religious creed.

What little is known of the Requiem's origin is based on Brahms' correspondence and on reminiscences published after his death. In a letter to Clara Schumann, Robert's widow, in April 1865, Brahms enclosed a choral movement from 'a kind of German Requiem'. At this point he referred to three of the movements, probably 1,2, and 4, which were still incomplete. By February 1866 he had completed a six-movement work (minus the present fifth movement). He worked further on editing the full score through October. Since the Requiem was not commissioned or written for any specific public event, Brahms had to take the lead in its production. It seemed natural that he should have first thought of a North German city such as Bremen, and a Protestant Cathedral for the first performance. Also, Carl Martin Reinthaler, the Cathedral's director, had a fine reputation as a choir trainer from whom Brahms could expect careful preparation of his work. Brahms began corresponding with Reinthaler in early October from Vienna, but he also used his Vienna contacts to secure a performance of movements 1 – 3 for December 1867, a program dedicated to the memory of Franz Schubert, which also included the *Rosamunde* music.

The awaited Bremen plans were finalized in early 1868 and the first performance of the six movements took place in the Cathedral on Good Friday of that same year. The program, titled *Geisliches Konzert* (Sacred Concert), was conducted personally by the composer, with the proceeds going to benefit the city's widows and orphans fund. The performance was a great success. The Cathedral was filled with over 2500 people in attendance, including many distinguished musicians from all over Germany and abroad. Clara's diary recounts the events of the day, the power of the work and the communicative strength of Brahms' conducting style.

In the month following the Bremen premiere Brahms completed another movement for soprano solo, chorus and orchestra, which became movement 5 in the final published sequence. Because of its reference to the comfort of a mother, there is speculation that Brahms added this text, remembering the death of his mother three years earlier. From its premiere in Leipzig in February

1869, the piece quickly attained the rank of a classic; it was heard in Germany twenty times within the first year. Though Brahms later in life expressed a desire to revise the Requiem, he never did so.

This music achieves a symphonic breadth and strength underlining the expressive significance of Brahms' text selections. It is his largest work in any medium. Throughout we hear a classically minded composer whose power comes not from the theatrical display of many a Romantic composer, but rather from carefully balanced control of form, harmony, rhythm, melody and tonal color. Brahms' Requiem is one of those extra special choral works to which both singers and audiences return with awe and delight.