

A German Requiem

JOHANNES BRAHMS

BORN Hamburg, Vienna, 1833

DIED Vienna, Austria, 1897

FIRST PERFORMED 18 February 1869, Gewandhaus, Leipzig, Germany, by the Gewandhaus Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Carl Reinecke, with Emilie Bellingrath-Wagner (soprano) and Frank Krückl (baritone)

DURATION 70 minutes

1 Selig sind, die da Leid tragen (Blessed are they that mourn)

2 Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras (For all flesh is as grass)

3 Herr, lehre doch mich (Lord, teach me)

4 Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen (How lovely are Thy dwelling places)

5 Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit (You now have sorrow)

6 Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt (For we have here no continuing city)

7 Selig sind die Toten (Blessed are the dead)

Johannes Brahms wasn't a religious man. Despite his traditional Protestant upbringing, and despite faithfully reading the Bible throughout his life – for consolation and insight, he said – he described himself as an agnostic and a humanist. He even admitted to his biographer Max Kalbeck in the last year of his life that he had never believed in life after death.

So why on earth would he write a Christian mass for the dead? To answer that, we need to look at both the background and the unusual form of *A German Requiem*.

Brahms composed the work from 1865 to 1868, when he was in his mid-30s. In other words, this is not the work of an old man contemplating his own mortality. Indeed, the piece's origins go back even further, to



1857, the year after the tragic early death of Brahms' great friend and mentor Robert Schumann. Following Schumann's death, Brahms began work on a symphony. He never completed it, but he resurrected its slow movement as the second movement of *A German Requiem*.

It was another death – of his beloved mother in February 1865 – and Brahms' subsequent period of deepest mourning that spurred the composer on to resume work on what would become *A German Requiem*. He completed another three of its movements before the end of that year.

An unusual title

But what of the work's unusual title?

Brahms didn't intend to convey any narrow nationalism in his Requiem. Instead, to him, it was a 'German' Requiem simply because its text was in his native tongue rather than in Latin. (In fact, he later said he would have happily called the work 'A Human Requiem'.)

But it's not quite as simple as just a choice of language. The texts that Brahms himself selected from the German Lutheran Bible stand in stark contrast to the traditional words of the Catholic Requiem. There's no mention of the horrors of the Last Judgement, nor any pleas for mercy from God or prayers for the dead.

Consolation for the living

While the Latin Requiem text focuses on the dead, Brahms' text selection is aimed very much at the living, offering encouragement and hope to those grieving, and presenting God as a source of comfort. Brahms saw the work as providing a universal, non-denominational response to the inevitability and sorrow of death. His piece charts a journey from anxiety to comfort, and each of its seven movements ends in a mood of confidence or loving promise.

Not everybody approved, of course. Critic George Bernard Shaw was less than impressed by the work, writing: 'It could only have come from the establishment of a first-class undertaker.' And Richard Wagner, Brahms' great rival, was outraged by what he saw as the bourgeois Protestant ethics of the piece. Brahms refused to be drawn into a fight, though: in response, he simply praised Wagner as a composer of genius.

The influence of *A German Requiem* has been profound. Its focus on consolation and comfort can be felt in later Requiems by Duruflé and Fauré, and the freedom with which Brahms approached his text is even echoed in such a forward-looking work as Britten's *War Requiem*. Rather than staying within the confines of tradition, in offering his personal message of hope and comfort at a time of sorrow – a feeling he knew well himself – Brahms created a work of warmth and universal relevance.

The music

The **first movement** is a gentle lament for

those in mourning, beginning with a caressing melody that goes on to form the basis for the rest of the movement. The chorus enters in prayerful, hymn-like phrases, and, aside from a couple of more animated episodes, the movement maintains its opening mood of restraint and consolation throughout.

Beginning as a slow-moving funeral march with a distinctive timpani rhythm, the **second movement** considers the transience of human life, building to two climaxes as if the mourning procession were passing by in front of us. The pace suddenly quickens, however, as the chorus reports the word of God, and the sombre atmosphere of its opening is replaced by one of unbridled joy.

The bass soloist delivers a troubled recitative on the impermanence of existence in the **third movement**, with interjections from the chorus, before a sudden swerve into the major as the chorus explains that all hope is with God. The brief **fourth movement** is a gently flowing chorale yearning for everlasting life in the house of God, and in the **fifth movement**, the soprano soloist ponders current sorrow and future joy in music of gentle acceptance.

The **sixth movement** is the closest Brahms comes to depicting the horrors of the Last Judgement, in an anxious opening for bass soloist and chorus. A sudden change to the major marks God's victory over death, however, and the movement ends with a celebratory fugue.

There's a distinctly Bachian feel to the opening of the **seventh movement**, which quotes from the earlier composer's *St Matthew Passion* in its orchestral writing. It's a broad, expansive movement that offers comfort and reassurance to the dead, ending in peace and acceptance.