

A German Requiem

Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

1. Blessed are they that mourn
2. Behold, all flesh is as the grass
3. Lord, let me know mine end
4. How lovely are thy dwellings
5. Ye now have sorrow
6. For we have here no abiding city
7. Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord

For some years Brahms had been considering various ideas for a Requiem, but it was not until 1866, when he was 33, that he began work on it seriously. It was completed the following year with the exception of the fifth movement, which he added later in order to achieve a more balanced structure. In its incomplete form *Ein Deutsches Requiem* was first heard in Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday 1868. The final version was performed the following year at Leipzig's famous concert-hall, the Gewandhaus.

Brahms may have written the *Requiem* in memory of his mother, who died in 1865; it is equally possible that he had in mind his great friend and mentor, Robert Schumann, whose madness and tragic death had profoundly affected the young Brahms. The composer himself gave no indication of whose memorial the *Requiem* might be, if indeed it was any one person's. As with all great music, the universal message of its vision transcends the circumstances of its conception.

The work's title reflects Brahms' use of the Lutheran Bible rather than the customary Latin one. He compiled the text himself from both Old and New Testaments, and from the Apocrypha. It has little in common with the conventional Requiem Mass, and omits any reference to the Last Judgement - a central feature of the Catholic liturgy - and any final plea for mercy or prayers for the dead. It also makes only a passing reference in the last movement to Christian redemption through the death of Jesus. Not surprisingly, then, the title of "Requiem" has at times been called into question, but Brahms' stated intention was to write a Requiem to comfort the living, not one for the souls of the dead. Consequently the work focuses on faith in the Resurrection rather than fear of the Day of Judgement. Despite its unorthodox text, the *German Requiem* was immediately recognised as a masterpiece of exceptional vision, and it finally confirmed Brahms' reputation as a composer of international stature.

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 of the resurrection in the towering sixth movement. Similarly, the baritone solo in the third movement, 'Lord, let me know mine end', is paralleled in the fifth by the soprano solo, 'Ye now have sorrow'. The lyrical fourth section, 'How lovely are thy dwellings', 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.

This carefully balanced architecture is matched by an equally firm musical structure based on two principal ideas which Brahms skilfully uses in a variety of subtle guises throughout the work. The most important of these occurs at the opening choral entry and consists of the first three notes sung by the sopranos to the words 'Bless-ed they'. Brahms uses this musical cell as the main building block of the whole piece, subjecting it to a variety of transformations, including upside-down and back-to-front versions, both of which play as significant a role as the original form. The other important musical idea is a chorale-like melody played by the violas at the very beginning. Its most obvious reappearance is in the second movement, now in a minor key, as an expansive melody sung by the choir in unison. Brahms had recently discovered the cantatas of J.S.Bach, and there seems little doubt that this theme was derived from a very similar chorale melody in Bach's Cantata No.27.

The opening movement, the text of which is one of the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, begins in hushed and sombre mood, reflected in the orchestration by the temporary absence of the violins. As the music proceeds, however, mourning is transformed into comfort.

The second movement, in the dark key of B flat minor, is centred 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 some brief respite before the funeral march returns. Eventually, at 'But yet the Lord's word standeth for ever', an energetic *allegro* emerges, once more transfiguring darkness into light and leading to a glorious conclusion.

In the third movement, the baritone soloist and chorus begin by pondering the transience of human existence. The soloist then asks 'In what shall I hope?' 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 unshakeable foundation for the final resolution.

After the intensity of the first three movements, the pivotal fourth - a serene pastorale - 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 loved.

The fifth movement features a sublime soprano solo accompanied by woodwind, horns and muted strings. The chorus, too, plays an accompanying role. Whereas the baritone soloist in the third movement sung of grief and doubt, the soprano's message here is one of maternal consolation.

Brahms reserves his most dramatic music for the imposing sixth movement. It begins in reflective mood, but soon the baritone soloist introduces the familiar verses 'We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed at the sound of the last trumpet', at which point the music explodes into a blaze of sound and energy. The intensity builds to a climax at 'Grave, where is thy victory?' and a majestic fugue then ensues. In the middle of this fugue two *fortissimo* climaxes grow out of an exhilarating orchestral Jacob's ladder that reaches up to heaven as it passes from the bass instruments right up to the flutes and violins. The movement ends with a final powerful statement.

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 the *Requiem* reaches its peaceful conclusion at the same word with which it began: 'Blessed'.