

Ein deutsches Requiem by Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

There are some experiences in life which should not be demanded twice from any man, and one of them is listening to the Brahms Requiem.

George Bernard Shaw

Johannes Brahms was born to a working-class family in Hamburg. His father was a town musician and his mother a seamstress. They recognized his musical talent and he was able to study the piano from the age of seven. Soon he was supplementing the family income by playing the piano in restaurants and theatres, and by teaching. His first published composition was a piano sonata, which appeared in 1852.

In the spring of 1853, the 20-year old Brahms went on his first concert tour as an accompanist to the Hungarian violinist Eduard Remenyi. In Hanover, he met the renowned violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who was impressed by his compositions and gave him a letter of introduction addressed to Robert Schumann, then living in Düsseldorf.



R. Schumann



J. Brahms (1853)

Brahms arrived at the Schumanns' house on October 1st, 1853. Schumann, then 42 years old, and his wife Clara, a virtuoso pianist and composer, were amazed at Brahms's talent. Robert's diary entry reads: "Visit by Brahms, a genius," and he published an article in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* proclaiming Brahms as the long-sought successor to Beethoven. Clara's diary describes Brahms as "one of those who come as if sent straight from God."

Music critics, looking at the handful of compositions published by the young Brahms (some because of Schumann's support), scoffed at Schumann's impetuous prediction—and sharpened their knives. For the rest of his life, Brahms had to endure comments like the following, from George Bernard Shaw, who was then a notorious music critic:

Brahms is nothing more than a sentimental voluptuary . . . rather tiresomely addicted to dressing himself up as Handel or Beethoven and making a prolonged and intolerable noise.

The year after Brahms's visit, Robert Schumann attempted suicide in a fit of depression and was committed to a mental sanatorium; he died there in 1856. Clara Schumann was now a widow with seven children. The young Brahms was deeply shocked by these events and he began planning a memorial composition.

Originally, it was to be a symphony, but most of the material composed for this eventually became his 1st Piano Concerto, published in 1859. Brahms had changed his mind and decided that the memorial composition should be a choral work, though not a conventional *Requiem*. The traditional Roman Catholic *Requiem* is a prayer for the departed; but Brahms wanted to compose a work that would provide solace to the living. Although he was not pious, he was very familiar with the Lutheran bible, and he chose verses that suited his intentions. By 1861, he had selected the text for a four-movement cantata, but other compositional projects took priority.



J. Brahms (1865)

Then, in 1865, Brahms's dearly beloved mother died and he resumed work on the planned memorial composition. He adapted the one movement from the abandoned symphony that had not been used in his Piano Concerto, and within two months had composed three new movements. By 1866, all but what is now the fifth movement had been composed.

The first performance of this material was at the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna in December 1867, in a semi-private concert dedicated to the memory of Franz Schubert. The conductor was Johann von Herbeck. Brahms had wanted the première to be in the Protestant north of Germany but reluctantly agreed to a performance of the first three movements. It wasn't a success.

Brahms had titled the work *A German Requiem*. The adjective "German" wasn't intended to have nationalistic overtones; it was simply meant to describe the language of the text. But composers such as Wagner were offended that Brahms should presume to write a work for a "Germany" that didn't exist (until 1871). The "Requiem" designation also

offended traditionalists, especially Catholics, because the text made no reference to Jesus or to Christian dogma on redemption. Music critics accustomed to the ultra-Romantic excesses of Liszt and Wagner complained that the work was too austere. Finally, the timpanist ruined the performance of the 3rd movement by misreading the rare dynamic marking *pf* (*poco forte*; i.e., slightly loud) as *ff* (*fortissimo*; i.e., very loud) and overwhelming the rest of the orchestra and the vocal soloists.

The first public performance of *Ein deutsches Requiem* was in the Cathedral in Bremen, near Hamburg, on Good Friday, 1868, with Brahms himself conducting. But even in this predominantly Protestant venue, there were religious issues. The organizer of the concert, Karl Reinthaler, asked Brahms to add a movement to the *Requiem* making reference to Jesus or salvation to appease Christian sensibilities. Brahms refused, but Reinthaler added *I know that my Redeemer liveth* from Handel's *Messiah* and an excerpt from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* to the program.

The concert was well publicized and 2500 persons were in attendance, including Brahms's loyal friends Joseph Joachim and Clara Schumann. The concert seems to have been outstandingly successful; the work was performed again in Bremen just two weeks later.

Brahms composed a new fifth movement for soprano solo at this point and the now completed work was published and performed in all the major German cities. The reception in Protestant venues was notably warmer than in Catholic ones, but in 1869 alone, there were no less than thirteen performances. Similarly, the work was more successful in predominantly Protestant countries such as England and America than in Catholic ones such as France and Italy. Audiences were more positive than critics, who didn't quite know what to make of a work that combined Renaissance, Baroque, Classical and Romantic elements.

The most scathing opinions came from "modernist" composers such as Wagner and their supporters, such as George Bernard Shaw, who considered Brahms to be a musical reactionary. But in 1933, Arnold Schoenberg gave a radio talk on "Brahms the Progressive" which refuted these opinions by pointing out aspects of Brahms's compositions that were



Clara Schumann

modern and innovative. Schoenberg's arguments were actually rather dubious; he was in effect conceding defeat: Brahms was by then almost universally considered to have achieved Schumann's impetuous prediction, with the *Requiem* as the turning point in his career.



J. Brahms (1895)

Brahms died on April 3rd, 1897. He had never married. His life-long friend, Clara Schumann, had died the previous year. The major work performed at a memorial concert for Brahms at the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna on April 11th, was, of course, his *Requiem*.

Brahms scored *Ein deutsches Requiem* for a large orchestra with strings, woodwinds, brass instruments, harp, and organ. But in 1866 he prepared a reduction for piano four-hands as a present for Clara Schumann. This was used as the accompaniment for the first performance of the *Requiem* in England at the home of Sir Henry Thompson in London in July 1871 and at least two recordings of the *Requiem* have been made using this arrangement. The accompaniment for this evening's performance is based on a similar arrangement for two pianos by Augustus Grütters.

Three Motets by Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Es ist das Heil uns kommen her and *Lass dich nur nichts nicht dauren* were composed around 1859 when Brahms was a choral conductor in Hamburg. The first is a traditional four-part Lutheran chorale, leading to an elaborate concluding fugue. The second is a double canon, with the sopranos and tenors in counterpoint with the altos and basses. *Unsere Väter hofften auf dich* is from a set of Festive and Commemorative Pieces composed in 1889 for the opening of the Hamburg Industrial Exhibition. It is for double choir used antiphonally, as in many works of Renaissance master Heinrich Schütz.

***Crucifixion* by Carl Mathis**

Carl Mathis immigrated to Canada in 1968, and taught voice and choral music at Acadia University, in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. In 1972, he moved to Charlottetown, PEI, teaching voice, choral music, theory and composition at the University of Prince Edward Island until his retirement in

1997. He has been precentor at the St. Peter's Cathedral in Charlottetown, singing under organist F. Alan Reesor, since 1972. The short motet *Crucifixion* will have had its first performance on Palm Sunday at St. Peter's Cathedral.

***Surely He has Borne our Griefs*, by Mark McDonald**

Mark McDonald is a Bachelor of Music student at the School of Music at Queen's University studying organ performance with David Cameron and composition with Dr. Alfred Fisher. He was recently appointed Assistant Organist at Chalmers. *Surely He has Borne our Griefs* was written in 2007; it is his first major choral work.