

## PROGRAM NOTES

### ***Begräbnisgesang*** (Burial Song), Op.13

This evening we offer three of Johannes Brahms' greatest meditations upon the subject of death — *Begräbnisgesang*, op.13, *Ein deutsches Requiem*, op.45, and *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op.121 — works whose dates of composition mark the stages of youth, maturity, and old age of the composer's own life. The majestic *Begräbnisgesang* was composed in Hamburg in 1858, and is one of the composer's earliest choral pieces. Already the strong influence of the music of the German Reformation on the composer is in evidence in this "Burial Song" which is based on a hymn in seven stanzas by Michael Weise (d. 1534). Around the somber melody Brahms created some very dramatic music whose expressiveness foreshadows passages in the later German Requiem and the Four Serious Songs. A beautiful contrasting central section in C major offers hope through the reassurance that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has shown the pathway to eternal life. The return of the opening C minor chorale tune, with its unusual word accentuations and somber scoring, provides an almost barren conclusion to the work, as the inevitability of death is considered. As Brahms' biographer, Karl Geiringer, wrote: "all is straightforward yet monumental: at the opposite pole to sentimental lamentation... a work of simple, yet overwhelming magnificence." Originally scored for a group of winds, brass, and timpani, this evening we perform the more intimate arrangement for piano four-hands by Brahms' friend and associate Robert Keller (1828-1891). A piano teacher and musical editor for the firm of Simrock, Keller is today remembered for his fine arrangements of works by both Brahms and Antonin Dvořak. It was Keller who arranged all four of Brahms' symphonies for piano four-hands, giving them a much wider exposure to the music-making German middle classes.

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### ***Vier ernste Gesänge*** (Four Serious Songs), op. 121

"I did not think that worse news of your mother was to be expected — but deep in the heart something often whispers and stirs, quite unconsciously perhaps, which may in time ring out in the form of poetry or music," Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann's daughter in the spring of 1896; Clara had suffered a stroke on March 26 and lingered until almost two months later. During her last illness, Brahms came to realize that his own days were numbered. To friends he dismissed his sallow complexion as "bourgeois jaundice," but he surely recognized the alarming symptom of cancer of the liver, the disease of which his father had died. It was at this time that Brahms composed the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, completing them on May 7, his final birthday; they were the last work to be published in his lifetime.

Brahms compiled the texts from Martin Luther's translation of the Bible — mostly passages from the apocryphal book, Ecclesiasticus. The first song, "***Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh,***" asks rhetorically whether our ultimate destination in the dust is not the same as that of animals, and then concludes that our sole source of happiness is love of our work. As the piano begins its mournful journey, listen for how closely the theme is related to both the opening of *Begräbnisgesang* and to the *Requiem's* grave second movement. The piano takes up an ominous triplet figure which leads the singer to his climactic question, "Who knows if the human spirit rises upwards?", and which later drives the song to its dramatic conclusion.

"***Ich wandte mich***" is the most reflective of the four songs. In it, the poet-singer muses about the conditions that humans must often endure; he looks around and sees injustice and oppression everywhere under the sun. Brahms had no illusions about the world's bleakness; as he hymns those fortunate enough to be dead or, better yet, those who were never born, he repeatedly descends ladders of linked thirds into dark, but ultimately peaceful, depths. "***O Tod, o Tod, wie bitter bist du***" reveals Death's Janus faces: its cruelty to those who die in their prime, and its comfort to those who are without hope, or whose lives have lost their meaning. Brahms' music conveys this duality by shifting from the bleak and foreboding to the reassuring, the two connected by his "death motive" of falling thirds which permeate the song. "***Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelszungen redete,***" a setting of St. Paul's famous words in 1 Corinthians, is both a paean to, and a eulogy for, love, proclaiming it to be the greatest and most important virtue that humankind can possess. It is among the final and most moving testaments to Brahms' faith in humanity, if not in divinity.

The Four Serious Songs are unique in Brahms' output, combining the intimacy and idiomatic writing of his late *Klavierstücke* with the dramatic weight and large-scale structural thinking of his late orchestral and chamber music.

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***Ein deutsches Requiem nach Worten der heiligen Schrift*** (A German Requiem to Words of Holy Scripture), Op. 45

The drawn-out genesis of the *German Requiem* was typical of a composer whose dogged perfectionism intensified to match the size of the challenge that faced him. The sinister march of the second movement is rooted in music written around the time of Robert Schumann's tragic demise in 1856, while much of the rest was composed in the aftermath of the death of the composer's beloved mother, nine years later. Those close to Brahms were convinced that his *German Requiem* honored the memory of both.

Brahms assembled the texts himself from Luther's translation of the Bible, and his selections form a pointed contrast with the traditional Latin sequence of the Roman Catholic requiem mass. A letter from Brahms to his publisher suggests that those who assumed that the work was a traditional requiem mass *manqué* were missing the point: "It can in no way whatsoever be sung in place of the requiem mass in church." The natural home of the *German Requiem* was the concert hall rather than the cathedral, for its spirituality was grounded in religious culture rather than doctrine.

Brahms' primary concern with offering comfort to the living is evident from the text he chose for the first movement, "**Selig sind, die da Leid tragen,**" which is delivered by the chorus with hushed tenderness and achingly beautiful suspensions. The instrumental introduction outlines what many believe to be a reference to a Lutheran chorale. The prevailing gloom of the second movement's funereal "**Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras,**" haunting and terrifying by turn, is temporarily suspended by a hopeful passage that looks forward to Christ's return ("**So seid nun geduldig**"), and eventually gives way to the radiant light beamed forth by the first of the *Requiem's* Handel-like fugal passages, a transformation effected by Brahms' dramatic treatment of the verse "**Aber des Herrn Wort bleibt in Ewigkeit.**" Here, as elsewhere in the *Requiem*, the transition from darkness to light turns on the pivotal word "aber" ("but").

The third movement follows a similar trajectory: human ephemerality is contrasted with divine immortality, minor with major, baritone soloist with chorus, and antiphony with magisterial counterpoint. The ever-present tonic pedal point that anchors the final fugal section is a stirring musical manifestation of steadfastness. "**Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen**" brings some welcome respite: the musical style here comes close to Brahms' popular *Liebeslieder Walzer*, especially in the piano four-hands arrangement heard this evening. "**Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit,**" written almost two years after the rest of the work, introduces the soprano soloist as a maternal figure who brings comfort to the sorrowful. The harmonic restlessness and wandering bass line of "**Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt**" vividly depict the condition of homelessness before the oracular pronouncements of the baritone soloist herald Brahms' thrilling tone-painting of the resurrection of the dead, the *Requiem's* dramatic highlight. The ensuing fugue reaches heavenwards by miraculously extending the three-note choral motive that opened the whole work. Having depicted the transfiguration that might await us, Brahms quite deliberately returns us to the earthly state with which the work began in "**Selig sind die Toten,**" which ends with vocal writing of angelic beauty, and ethereal arpeggios. The cyclical structure suggests that Brahms' faith lay in the persistence of hope and comfort rather than in the mixed blessing of everlasting life.

Not content with the limited opportunities for performance occasioned by the work's massed orchestral and choral demands, Brahms arranged the orchestral score for piano four-hands. Since the piano was a mainstay of the bourgeois German-speaking household, such arrangements were extremely popular; they often provided the only means by which interested amateurs could acquaint themselves with the latest orchestral music from outside the region. Although many composers delegated the transcription of their music to their publishers' underlings, Brahms took a great deal of care when carrying out the work himself, and his arrangements are invariably idiomatic and faithful to the spirit of the score

rather than slavish to its letter. The piano scoring of the Requiem allows for an unsurpassed degree of intimacy, nimbleness, precision, and contrapuntal clarity. Rendering the second movement via four hands at two keyboards even evokes the lost sound-world of the symphony-cum-sonata-for-two-pianos from which it emerged. Brahms' piano arrangement facilitated the international transmission of his music at a time when his name was not sufficiently well known to guarantee the provision of orchestral forces overseas. To perform the work in this manner is thus to follow in a long and distinguished tradition that places pragmatism and the desire to communicate above canonicity for its own sake.

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