PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Johannes Brahms
Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.
Died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

Ein deutsches Requiem, Op. 45

The earliest music in Brahms's Ein deutsches Requiem (A German requiem) dates from 1854; six of the seven movements were completed in August 1866. The first three movements were premiered in Vienna on December 1, 1867. Brahms added a movement in fifth place in May 1868, and the first performance of the complete work was given in Leipzig on February 18, 1869. The score calls for four-part chorus, soprano and baritone soloists, and an orchestra consisting of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, harp, timpani, organ, and strings.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Brahms's A German Requiem were given at the Auditorium Theatre on April 15 and 16, 1898, with Minnie Fish-Griffin and Charles W. Clark as soloists, the Chorus of the Association (Arthur Mees, director), and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on February 18, 19, and 20, 1999, with Dorothea Röschmann and Thomas Quasthoff as soloists, the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Duain Wolfe, director), and Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this requiem at the Ravinia Festival on June 30, 1983, with Kathleen Battle and Håkan Hagegård as soloists, the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director), and James Levine conducting; and most recently on August 2, 1997, with Rebecca Evans and Thomas Hampson as soloists, the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Duain Wolfe, director), and Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

For the record
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus recorded A German Requiem in 1978 under Sir Georg Solti, with Kiri Te Kanawa and Bernd Weikl, for London; in 1983 under James Levine, with Kathleen Battle and Håkan Hagegård, for RCA; and in 1992 under Daniel Barenboim, with Janet Williams and Thomas Hampson, for Erato.

Brahms wasn't a religious man. Long after he made his name with A German Requiem—one of the most personal and deeply religious works of any century—Dvořák would remark: "Such a great man! Such a great soul! And he believes in nothing!"

But Brahms was not as uncomplicated a man as his genial and—in later years—grandfatherly façade suggested, and he was never a true agnostic. Even in his old age, he often would pick up the children's Bible he had been given when he was a year old and read from it at length. It was from that very book that he chose the passages for his first major choral and orchestral work, selecting not the standard requiem texts, but others for which he had a special fondness.

Like his First Symphony, the German Requiem took years to find its final shape. It began, in a sense, as piano music. Brahms started his career writing music to play at the piano, and that is how, at the age of twenty, he came to the attention of Robert Schumann, perhaps the greatest music critic among composers. Brahms showed up at the door, his briefcase bursting with music, and Schumann sat spellbound as Brahms displayed his wares at the keyboard. Although he had officially retired, Schumann dashed to his desk to write the last article of his career, introducing Brahms to his readers. In the young
pianist's hands, Schumann already heard "veiled symphonies," and he exhorted Brahms to "direct his magic wand where the powers of the masses of chorus and orchestra may lend him their forces." Schumann's suggestion was both wise and prophetic, as time would soon prove, and his track record was undeniably impressive: he had begun his critic's career by introducing another unknown, Frédéric Chopin, with the now-legendary "Hats off, gentlemen—a genius!"

The music we now know as the second movement of A German Requiem came first, and it originally was part of a sonata. In the spring of 1854 (only months after Schumann published his send-off), Brahms sat down at the keyboard with Robert's wife Clara and they played through his new two-piano sonata. And just as his relationship with Clara was to develop in mysterious, unpredictable ways, so too did this piano sonata: first, unsatisfactorily, into a symphony, and then as part of his first piano concerto, with a funeral march left unused.

Years passed. In February 1865 Brahms received a telegram from his brother telling him to come home at once if he wished to see his mother before she died. Brahms immediately set off for Vienna, but arrived too late. He now knew what to do with that leftover music. For some time, he had been thinking of writing a choral memorial to Robert Schumann, who had died in 1856; now, with a death in his own family, he set to work in earnest on a requiem, reworking the funeral march and writing five other movements in a matter of months. On Good Friday 1868, A German Requiem was performed for the first time. Brahms ran into Clara coming up the steps of the Bremen cathedral and proudly escorted her to her seat. Since Robert's death, Clara and Brahms had remained close (Clara, it is said, knew him better than anyone else), but never intimate. Brahms often seemed reserved and distant, even with friends, a tendency he inherited from his father, who attended the performance, and, alone among those gathered, sat stony faced. "The rest were in tears, even at the opening chorus, Selig," reported the organist John Farmer, who also remembered that, at the end, the elder Brahms commented calmly, "It was quite well done," and took a pinch of snuff.

It was the powerful image of Brahms's mother who set the requiem in motion, and it was her spirit that steered it to its final form. Brahms still was not satisfied with the work and, a month after the Bremen performance, wrote a new movement for soprano solo and chorus as a final memorial to his mother. ("I will comfort you as one whom a mother comforts" reads the passage Brahms picked from the book of Isaiah.) A German Requiem was now finished, and, at the same time, the composer's international career had truly begun.

A word about Brahms's text. It is not the standard Requiem Mass, and Brahms tells us that in his seldom-read subtitle, Ein deutsches Requiem, nach Worten der heiligen Schrift (A German requiem, after words of the Holy Scriptures). Brahms had misgivings about the adjective deutsches, thinking that he might have more appropriately referred not to the language of his text, but to all mankind, whom he wished to embrace in this music. (Brahms was moved—and probably reassured—to learn years later that Schumann had planned a work with the same title.)

Brahms learned from his Second Serenade that by eliminating violins and giving the leading string material to the violas, he could sustain a deep, somber mood colored by dark, burnished hues, and that is how he begins A German Requiem. There are occasional flickers of sunlight in the flute lines and glistening harp arpeggios, but it's the weight of Brahms's grief we most remember. At first, each time the chorus sings, the orchestra stops playing, as if to listen, but soon the music from these two spheres—the richly resonant accompaniment and the pure, ethereal singing—merges. The music builds to a climax—marked a simple, restrained forte—and then gradually unravels while the harp, an instrument Brahms rarely used, ripples through F major triads.

The music Brahms saved from his early two-piano sonata now begins, fully orchestrated. Although he wrote “Slow, moderate march” above the music, there are three beats to the measure, making it decidedly unmarchable; it has, instead, the quality of a slow dance of death. Midway through, Brahms grabs us by the shoulders when the chorus bursts in, singing “But the word of the Lord endures forever,” and, embracing that thought, begins a forceful section of new fervor. At the mention of “pain and suffering,” darkness passes over the music, pushing it into somber, unfamiliar places from which it will eventually emerge, armed with the sound of trumpets and horns. “Everlasting joy” is brilliant and
fortissimo, but the ending is suddenly calm and reflective, confident in the newfound quiet strength of B-flat major.

The emphasis now changes. The baritone soloist addresses us directly, and the chorus repeats each verse after him. Eventually, both soloist and chorus urgently ask "Now, Lord, how shall I find comfort?" over and over. The music slows; the winds linger over quiet chords of uncertainty. Then the voices of the chorus rise up in a slowly blossoming thought: "I hope in you." Now the organ sounds low D, joined by the double basses, contrabassoons, and tuba, and a triumphant fugue builds above this solid ground. Brahms's symbolism is powerful, for throughout the elaborate wanderings of many independent instrumental and choral lines—even at moments of harmonic discord—the steadfast strength of the central tonality is unchallenged.

Music of consolation stands at the heart of Brahms's composition. The fourth movement is relatively modest in scale and intent, but it is no less attentive to the essence and the power of the text. The serene, benevolent phrases of the opening give way to new harmonic regions and a more urgent declamation at "Meine Seele verlanget" (My soul longs); the accompaniment is overcome by repeated stabs of pain at "mein Leib und Seele freuen" (My body and soul rejoice); and both orchestra and chorus let loose with a joyful double fugue of praise before the end.

The fifth movement is the one Brahms added after the Bremen premiere. The first voice we hear is that of the solo soprano—a new sound to our ears. The chorus enters, repeating a single line of text: "I will comfort you as one whom a mother comforts." The music sustains a single hushed mood, rising only once to a climax.

Next comes music of great breadth and dramatic power. The opening choral stanzas are cut short by the baritone solo: "Behold, I tell you a mystery." The chorus responds in hushed chords, and the baritone brings the music to a complete halt "in einem Augenblick" (in a moment). "For the trumpet shall sound" not only takes the obvious cue from the text, but adds a blaze of brass chords, surging strings, timpani rolls, and a flood of choral sound. The music reaches higher as the chorus repeatedly asks, "Death, where is your sting?" The sheer force of the cries is so urgent that the progress of the music is temporarily stalled. Finally, the altos break free with a triumphant new theme ("Lord, you are worthy") that launches an extraordinary fugue in both chorus and orchestra. Only Beethoven, among other nineteenth-century composers, could have conceived a fugue as magisterial, and only Handel among earlier figures might have matched the magnificent sweep of Brahms's music. (Brahms was the most historically astute of composers, a student and admirer of music written three hundred years before his time, and a serious collector of old music manuscripts.) Twice, as the chorus continues, the music strides upward five octaves from the low strings and tuba to the high trumpet and violins, like a great wave pushing toward a thundering climax. Brahms's control, as he builds and then falls back, only to build again, is masterful.

The final movement begins with the great wingspread of an extended theme in F major, which slowly encompasses the whole chorus. After a gentle interlude in A major, and a return to the opening material, the word "Selig" triggers a flashback, and the music plunges unexpectedly into E-flat major and revives the opening chorus of the first movement. Finally, of necessity, we recover F major, and now the music of both movements merges so thoroughly that we can no longer tell one from the other. As the harp unfolds the notes of F major, the voices settle in octaves on F, in calm resolution.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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