

## Brahms Requiem Notes

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Ein deutsches Requiem, nach Worten der heiligen Schrift, op. 45

(A German Requiem, to Words of the Holy Scriptures)

Two-piano version by Brahms

English translation by Robert Shaw

Lost in translation? Not in this case.

Most people experience Brahms' Requiem listening to a performance by a full symphony orchestra and a chorus of two hundred voices (or more) singing in the German language in which Brahms composed the work.

Tonight, Griffin Choral Arts presents a version sung by approximately fifty voices, accompanied by two pianos (plus timpani and string bass), and in English.

But rest assured. Tonight's intimate performance is not only artistically justified but positively advantageous in many ways, as we can appreciate with further perspective on Brahms' life and times, on his musical materials and craftsmanship, and on the unique interrelationships between the German and English translations of Brahms' chosen biblical texts.

Brahms' Requiem is (among many other virtues) the composer's heartfelt response to the deaths of two important people in his life: his friend and mentor, composer Robert Schumann, who died in 1856, and his own mother, who died in 1865. While even before Schumann's death Brahms had composed some fragments of music that would re-emerge in the Requiem, and may have been at work on the "maternal" elements of the Requiem even before his mother died, these two trauma clearly focused Brahms' emotional and creative attentions upon bringing to reality the final vision of his masterpiece. Indeed, the Requiem's close integration of music and text may trace to the perfect balance of these two personal influences: Schumann's encouragement of Brahms' career as a composer and Mutter Brahms' inspiration of her son's sensitivity to literature. We should not underestimate, either, the influence of Clara Schumann (Robert's spouse and eventual widow) on Brahms, both personally and musically, in some surprising ways in the Requiem and beyond, as we shall see.

In many ways this work is not a typical Requiem. Traditionally, a Requiem was a musical setting of a mass (communion liturgy) celebrated at a funeral. The term "Requiem" itself derives from the opening words of the funeral mass: "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine" (Eternal rest grant them, Lord). An important element of the typical Requiem is the "Dies Irae" (Day of Wrath and Judgment), but this emphasis would find no place in Brahms' gentler vision. A Requiem is normally organized in liturgical sections such as Kyrie, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei, but Brahms instead follows the lead of his fellow Protestant composers Bach and Handel in organizing around Bible passages befitting the chosen theme(s)—in Brahms' case the theme of "sorrow turned into joy." These differing Protestant-Roman Catholic understandings of Requiem form affected contemporary reactions to Brahms' work. Early versions of the Requiem were far better-received in Bremen, in Protestant northern Germany, than in Roman Catholic Vienna. Brahms' Requiem was (and still is) sometimes criticized as insufficiently Christian, in not referring directly to Christ or to Christ's redemptive death and resurrection. Yet we can be sure that Brahms knew his Bible well (including the Apocrypha) and was quite devout, in post-Enlightenment times when typical modes of religious expression had grown more understated, especially in the strong pietism in nineteenth century German Lutheranism.

Also unusual for a Requiem Mass was for it to be composed in any language except Latin. While he was at work composing his German-language Requiem during the years of the Franco-Prussian War, and completed the Requiem only two years before the unification of Germany in 1871, Brahms demurred at the question whether the work had patriotic or nationalistic motives, saying that even though he called it "A German Requiem," he preferred to think of it as a "Human" Requiem. (The future bore out Brahms' universalist vision. During World War II, while performances of Beethoven's music in the U.S. dwindled in numbers, the frequency of performance of Brahms' Requiem increased substantially. Further surges in popularity occurred worldwide in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.)

In exploring the musical content of Brahms' masterwork, Director Stephen Mulder offers these observations: "Brahms' overall theme of 'sorrow turned into joy' can be seen even at the broadest and most symbolic levels as we look at the musical architecture. Arnold Schoenberg said, 'Aesthetic pleasure can be derived from form itself.' Brahms Requiem scholar William Westhafer states: 'The Requiem is a landmark of musical architecture, serving as a monument not only to Brahms' excelling gifts in the formal aspects of composition, but also to the creative genius of the human mind.'"

In a very real sense, the entire work spins forth from a surprisingly simple opening. After the instruments emphasize the low tonic F of the opening key of F major, the first chords sung by the chorus offer the three-note pattern (in the soprano melody) that provides the foundation for the rest of the cathedral-like architecture. These notes are the rising sequence F->A->B-flat. The words sung to these notes (“Selig sind” [Blessed, they]) give this pattern its traditional name, the “Blessed motif.” Not only does this motif pervade the entire work but its rising arc shapes what many scholars have noted to be the “arch-like” overall structure of the Requiem, which emphasizes a great number of complex symmetries both of music and of text. So foundational is the Blessed motif that Dr. Mulder notes that its “mathematical” variations occur an astonishing 628 times. Equally remarkable is the balanced distribution of these variations: the “normal,” initial pattern occurs 151 times, while the other three patterns appear 166, 158, and 153 times.

While the examples of Brahms’ careful matching of musical structure to his chosen texts are too numerous to catalog here, especially noticeable and memorable are his uses of fugue. Derived from the Latin and Italian words for “flying” (or “running”), a musical fugue is a sequential entering of voice lines, as if each line “chases” the others. While fugal elements are present in all seven movements of Brahms’ Requiem, the longest and most dramatic are those that conclude movements 2, 3 and 6. The ability to compose elegant fugues is considered one of the highest attainments of a composer’s skill. But the memorable fugues in Brahms’ Requiem are not mere exhibitionism; nor are they merely Brahms’ homage to the masters he is imitating: Bach and Handel. The great fugues in movements 2, 3, and 6 are extensions of Brahms’ messages. The dominant theme of the texts with which those movements begin is the fleeting brevity of life—almost literally, the grief that “time flees” (as in the Latin adage “tempus fugit”). Yet when the great fugues enter toward the end of the movement, they unforgettably signal the rising hope that soon earthly grief will pass into the comfort of heavenly eternity.

Can these grand, complex sonic splendors possibly be conveyed by anything less than a full symphony orchestra and a 200-voice chorus? Brahms clearly thought they could.

Brahms himself composed the piano version (originally for four hands at one piano but often played at two pianos). Not merely a reduction of the orchestral score, the piano version is an independent composition, whose first historically-documented performance occurred in England in 1871.

The affinities between the Requiem and piano performance run deep. Of course, Brahms himself was one of the great pianists of his day. In fact, it was only with the Requiem that he established his reputation as more than a pianist (and, less well-known, as a choral director). At least two sections of the Requiem originally began as compositions for piano. Soon after Robert Schumann’s attempted suicide in 1854 Brahms composed a march movement for a planned two-piano sonata that eventually emerged in the first movement of his Piano Concerto # 1. The piano-duet format also had special significance for Brahms, given his many impromptu duets with Clara in the Schumann home. Somewhat less well known is that the slow second movement (Adagio) of Brahms’ first piano concerto—which sounds very much like the famous fourth movement of the Requiem (“How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place”)—was dedicated by Brahms specifically to Clara Schumann, not long after Robert’s death in 1856, using the words “I am painting a lovely portrait of you.” By most accounts, Brahms’ lifelong affections for Clara were so deep (even if platonic), that he continued to manage her family’s household affairs for many years following Robert’s death.

A piano-performance version of the Requiem also had obvious practical, even commercial, advantages, especially given the piano’s rise in the nineteenth century as a “must-have” commodity in middle- and upper-class homes. Most important of all, certain beauties are achieved in the piano accompaniment to the Requiem that simply could not be equaled even by an orchestra. A prime example is the staccato, “raindrop” effect in Movement Two that introduces the chorus’s references to the welcome fall of rain to revive the parched earth. Whereas the orchestral flute would play this passage, the percussive quality of the piano in imitating the sound of rain drops (perhaps recalling a similar effect in Chopin’s “Raindrop” piano prelude) is unexcelled.

While in Brahms’ time the orchestras that performed the Requiem likely varied widely in size (with at least one large orchestra employing six harps, beyond the two for which Brahms’ score calls), some performances were no doubt by smaller ensembles—as well as by small choruses. The “original performance practice” movement that began in the late twentieth century offers further scholarly and artistic justification for smaller-scale performances. Also strongly suggesting that Brahms had accessibility for small choruses in mind all along is that this massive choral work is scored for SATB, lacking (with only a few rare exceptions) wider subdivisions of the voice parts that might occur in other large nineteenth-century choral works. Thus, “chamber music” performances (such as that by GCA tonight) stand in equal artistic integrity with large, symphonic presentations. Smaller-scaled performances may even offer more interesting artistic challenge, since the complex textures of the music lie much more exposed than in larger ensembles. Perhaps most important of all, a performance that relies more on voices than on massive instrumentation inevitably heightens the impact of Brahms’

“comforting” texts.

In the case of tonight’s English-version performance, the use of a translation is no mere convenience, but an important aspect of the artistic integrity of the performance. The translator in this case is Robert Shaw, who completed his adaptation shortly before he died in 1999, a fact which adds further poignancy to his version of the Requiem. While important differences in syntax occur between the German and English Bible translations, the Bible Brahms used and the Biblical style used by Shaw have one powerful commonality: each is almost universally acknowledged to be the highest literary achievement in that language (especially Martin Luther’s translation of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures into German). As Maestro Shaw noted, the exalted language of the Authorized Version of the Bible (more commonly known as the “King James Version”) may be the only worthy vehicle for the profundity of the Brahms texts, especially in their musical context. Rather than merely copy the phrasing of the Authorized Version, Shaw attempts to remain consistent with that style (which was somewhat archaically formal even in 1611). While Shaw may not always be “faithful” either to the King James English or to the German—he even interjects a specific reference to Christ, where both the Authorized Version and the German text call only for “Lord” (Herr)—there is no question that, given his legendary appreciation for the “music” of language, Shaw’s adaptation is both artistically and spiritually faithful to Brahms in both languages.

## Movements and Texts

### Movement One:

The instruments offer a slow, quiet introduction to the choral statement of the famous “Blessed motif”—the words of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall have comfort.” (Matthew 5:4)

This establishes that Brahms’ is not the typical Requiem, which traditionally focuses upon the deceased. Instead, Brahms’ concern is the consolation of the living, those who mourn.

A transition of key signals the introduction of a new passage of text, offering the promise of additional rewards to those who grieve. The prospect of these additional blessings is conveyed in greater dynamic range and further key transitions.

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.

Who goeth forth and weepeth and beareth precious seed shall doubtless return rejoicing,  
And bring his sheaves with him. (Psalm 126:5-6)

In the first of many textual and musical symmetries, the Blessed motif returns to end the movement. The new certainty of the rewards promised in Psalm 126 climaxes in high A’s in both soprano and tenor, emphasizing the word “Shall” (have comfort), shortly before the movement ends as quietly as it began.

### Movement Two

The theme of planting and harvest introduced by the Psalm 126 text in the preceding movement continues, but with a dramatic shift of tone. Beginning with the broader interval of a fourth in the low registers of the accompaniment (which may echo the opening notes of the Lutheran chorale “If You But Trust in God to Guide You,” which some scholars suggest—and Brahms himself may have hinted—was an important thematic influence on his Requiem), Movement Two opens in a minor-key march, but with added complexity, for being in triple-time. The heavy, somber musical mood matches the text:

Behold, all flesh is as the grass, and all the goodliness of man is as the flower of grass;  
For lo, the grass with’reth, and the flower thereof decayeth. (I Peter 1:24)

Interrupting this desolation is a transition to a quicker, major-key admonition:

Now therefore be patient, O my brethren, unto the coming of Christ.  
 See how the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth,  
 And hath long patience until he receive the early rain and the latter rain. (James 5:7)

The minor-key march of desolation reasserts itself and the binary pattern is repeated—strongly imitating the mourner's emotional struggle between despair and acceptance. Fear of mortality, however, is eventually shocked into bright confidence (B-flat major) by the triumphal reminder from the next verse of I Peter:

But yet the Lord's word endureth forevermore! (I Peter 1:25)

Rising hope transforms further, into an allegro ma non troppo, now in a double-meter fugue (more truly march-like). The joy is so strong that dancelike syncopations take over both the choral and the instrumental texture. The triple-meter rhythms from the movement's minor-key opening eventually return in the accompaniment, sometimes even "warring" with duple-meter passages in Brahms' characteristic penchant for three-against-two rhythmic complexity. The energy of the fugue is intensified by compression into stretto before finally relaxing into quieter confidence in a concluding tranquillo.

The redeemed of the Lord shall return again, and come rejoicing unto Zion,  
 Gladness (and) joy everlasting upon their heads shall be;  
 These shall their portion, and tears and sighing shall flee from them. (Isaiah 35:10)

### Movement Three

If the structure of the work is an architectural arch, this is the "heaviest" building block—the one whose difficult "rise" will require the supporting "keystone" in the movement to follow. In fact, the "height" required for this "lifting" increases, with tonal modulations and voice intervals widening to major and minor sixths. Especially difficult to sing, Movement Three presents complexity and turmoil directly reflecting its texts.

The movement begins with a baritone solo pondering the fragility of life. His Job-like laments are echoed, almost like a Greek tragic chorus, by the four-part choir:

Lord, make me to know the measure of my days on earth, to consider my frailty, that I must perish.  
 Surely, all my days here are as an handbreadth to Thee, and my lifetime is as naught to Thee.  
 (Psalm 39:4-5a)

As the meter shifts to 3/2, the solo, choral response, and accompaniment become more agitated:

Verily, mankind walketh in a vain show, and their best state is vanity.  
 Man passeth away like a shadow, he is disquieted in vain,  
 He heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them. (Psalm 39:5b-6)

The Baritone re-enters, asking the tortured question of the movement:

Now, Lord, O what do I wait for? (Psalm 39:7a)

The chorus echoes this question, beginning an extended fugue even before the soloist finishes his question. The fugue is an impatient clamor of leaping, overlapping vocal lines, warring with loud tremolo effects and complex counter-rhythms in the pianos.

When the answer to this agonized, extended question comes, it is in the chorus's upward spelling of a D major chord--sunlight casting away the darker d minor in which the movement began, now reflecting the serenity of the movement's most important text:

My hope is in thee. (Psalm 39:7b)

This new hopefulness crescendos homophonically, signaling the calming of the clamorous fugal questions that opened the movement.

The awakened hope culminates in the fully confident D major fugues that both triumphantly conclude the movement.

But the righteous souls are in the hand of God, nor pain nor grief shall nigh them come.  
(Apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 3:1)

#### Movement Four

The most familiar part of the Brahms Requiem, this movement forms what many scholars consider the “keystone” supporting the entire arch-like structure of the work. Depicting the beauty and serenity of Heaven, which is both the hope of the living and the reward of the blessed dead, the movement illustrates both the Lutheran-chorale aspect of Brahms’ musical heritage as well as the more recent influences of Mendelssohn-like graceful Romantic simplicity. Imparting the great serenity of this movement, the instrumental accompaniment begins with a mirror-image inversion of the Blessed motif heard in the entrance of the famous choral melody.

How lovely is Thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts.  
For my soul, it longeth, yea, fainteth for the courts of the Lord;  
My soul and body crieth out, yea for the Living God.  
Blest are they that dwell within Thy house. (Psalm 84:1,2,4a)

Of special note in this famous movement is the middle fugue section (in some sense, a keystone within a keystone), employing the favorite Brahmsian technique of metric displacement (in this case of a highly regular  $\frac{3}{4}$  pulse). Through syncopations and surprising placement of voice entrances in the choral fugue, Brahms wonderfully “suspends time”—perfectly imitating the timeless condition of those who serve in heaven:

They praise Thee, they praise Thy name evermore. (Psalm 84:4b)

#### Movement Five

The movement most closely associated with the death of Brahms’ mother was, perhaps paradoxically, not included in the earliest performances of the Requiem, although Brahms had probably planned its inclusion all along. Fittingly, the soprano soloist sings the role of the loving maternal figure, in a text poignantly chosen from the Gospel of John (the “Beloved” disciple whom the crucified Christ appointed to care for his disconsolate mother).

Ye now are sorrowful, howbeit ye shall again behold me,  
And your heart shall be joyful, and your joy no man taketh from you. (John 16:22)

Interwoven with the text of the opening solo are further words of comfort from the chorus.

Yea, I will comfort you, as one whom his own mother comforteth. (Isaiah 66:13)

Extended fugues continue to interweave these textual and musical themes, adding a third promise of comfort:

Ye know that for a little time labor and sorrow were mine,

But at last I have found comfort. (Apocryphal Ecclesiasticus [Sirach] 51:27)

The movement ends with quiet emphasis on the “maternal” main theme: “I will comfort you.”

### Movement Six

The many tonal and structural changes in this movement reflect the drama inherent in the Book of the Revelation, the final book in the New Testament, but tempered with the hope of heaven in First Corinthians. At the center of the movement arises a dramatic sub-“arch” beginning with the prophetic “Trumpet shall sound” theme, followed by the baritone soloist’s announcement that “Death shall be swallowed up in victory” (meaningfully recalling, symmetrically—the c minor tonality and the melodic leap of the fourth from the “If You But Trust” chorale). The movement concludes on the mighty fugue “Worthy Art Thou,” which on one hand pays homage to similar famous choruses in Bach and Handel but, in Brahms’ characteristically more humanistic Christian outlook, omits those other composers’ emphasis on “Worthy is the [sacrificially redeeming] Lamb.” Powerful but without overt theatricality, à la fellow Requiem composers Berlioz and Verdi, the movement may be all the more moving for its relative restraint.

Here on earth have we no continuing place, howbeit we seek to come. (Hebrews 13:14)

Lo, I unfold unto you a mystery. We shall not all sleep when He cometh.  
But we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the trumpet.  
For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.  
Then, what of old was written, the same shall be brought to pass.  
For death shall be swallowed in victory.  
Grave, where is thy triumph? Death, O where is thy sting? (I Corinthians 15:51-52, 54-55)

Worthy art Thou to be praised, Lord of honour and might, for Thou hast earth and heaven created,  
And for Thy good pleasure all things have their being, and were created. (Revelation 4:11)

Of special note on Brahms’ treatment of the “Trumpet shall sound” element is that where other composers (e.g., Handel, Verdi) would require actual trumpets to achieve the full effect, through careful harmonics and “fanfare”-like voice writing alone, Brahms makes even the trumpets of the full orchestra seem optional--thus further strengthening the claim that the piano-only version of the Requiem may have been part of Brahms’ intention all along.

### Movement Seven

Blesséd are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth. Saith the spirit that they rest from their labours, and that their works follow after them. (Revelation 14:13)

A seven-movement structure allows Brahms many rich symbolic and structural opportunities. In Judeo-Christian number symbolism, seven is among the most powerful positive numbers, recalling (among many other references) the Seven Seals of the Revelation just alluded to at the end of Movement Six. A seven-item sequence has a distinct median: occupied in Brahms’ architecture by the beatifically “keystone”-like “How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place” movement. Perhaps most important of all, Movement Seven focuses directly for the first time on the ostensible real subject/object of a Requiem: the dead themselves, an emphasis Brahms highlights consistently by forte volume increases at the points of reference to “the dead.”

Of further symbolic note is the repetition in this final movement of a technique used elsewhere in the Requiem and indeed popular among Romantic composers in general: the use of musical ciphers. The tonal structure of this final movement is the progression from F major to A major and then back again to F major. Composers (including, even in modern times, Shostakovich) often used the letters of the notes of the scale as symbols that could “spell” a word of thematic significance to the composition—witness the many works composed to pay homage to B-A-C-H (in German, H stood for the note B, while the letter B represented B-flat). The subtle yet almost unbearably beautiful culmination of the joy that ends the Requiem includes Brahms’ use of this F-A-F “code”—which especially after his Third Symphony became known as his personal “motto.” As early as 1853 he used this pattern to represent the German phrase “frei aber froh”—free but happy—a perfect description of both the now-consoled mourners and the beatific souls in heaven. His last composition, shortly before his death roughly thirty years after the Requiem, was his jewel-like Opus 122 collection of organ preludes based on Lutheran hymn tunes—which he tellingly dedicated to the memory of Clara Schumann. In one of these chorales—interestingly enough, also the mid-point “keystone” of the collection--both the “Blessed” and the “frei aber froh” themes reunite, reflected in Brahms’ choice of the 1649 Johann Crüger hymn text: “O how blessed are you who live in patient faith and through death come to God! You have broken free from all suffering that still holds us mortals captive.”

Whereas Movement One of the Requiem began “Blessed are they that mourn,” that Blessed motif now comes full circle to “Blessed are the dead”—reprising the key of F major in which the Requiem began. Equally noteworthy in Movement Seven’s culminating statement of the Blessed motif is that the opening soprano line inverts the motif (similar to the instrumental introduction in Movement Four). This now-downward movement begins the long fugues that generally decrease in volume until—with the greatest of poignancy—the Requiem ends almost exactly as it began: on the word “blessed” sung on a pianissimo F. Will the circle be unbroken? Brahms’ Requiem has answered with an emotionally and artistically rich, magnificent Yes.

Program notes by Bill Pasch, with acknowledgment of scholarship and other commentary by Jessica Duchon, Phillip Huscher, Ken Meltzer, Stephen Mulder, Michael Musgrave, Emmeline Rushton, Nancy Thuleen, and Leonard Van Camp.