

A Deeply Moving Choral Work

Module 15 of *Music: Under the Hood*

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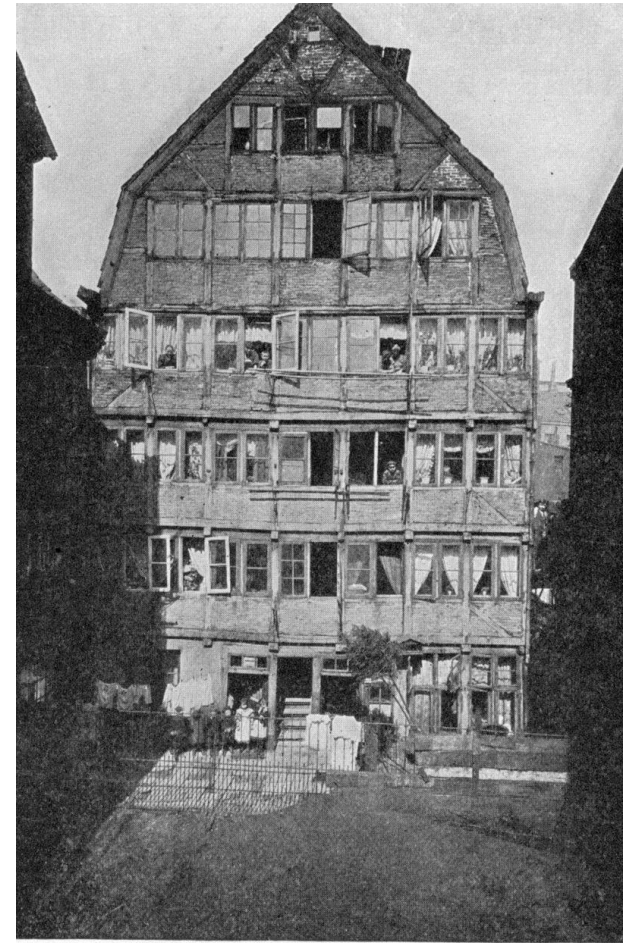
Osher Course
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Outline

- Biography of Johannes Brahms
- Commentary on *A German Requiem*

Biography

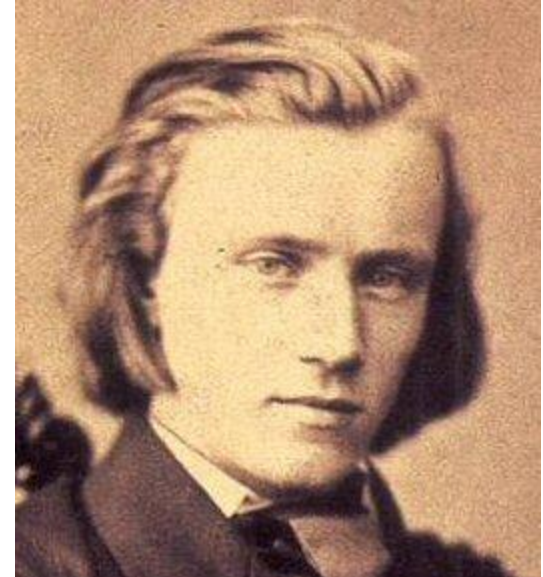
- Johannes Brahms, 1833-1897
 - Born in Hamburg
 - Piano lessons from his father.
 - At age 9, began outside lessons.
 - His teacher said he “could be such a good player, but he will not stop his never-ending composing.”
 - Wrote first piano sonata, age 12.
 - Played piano in brothels?
 - To support family?
 - Some scholars say this story is fabricated.



Where Brahms was born

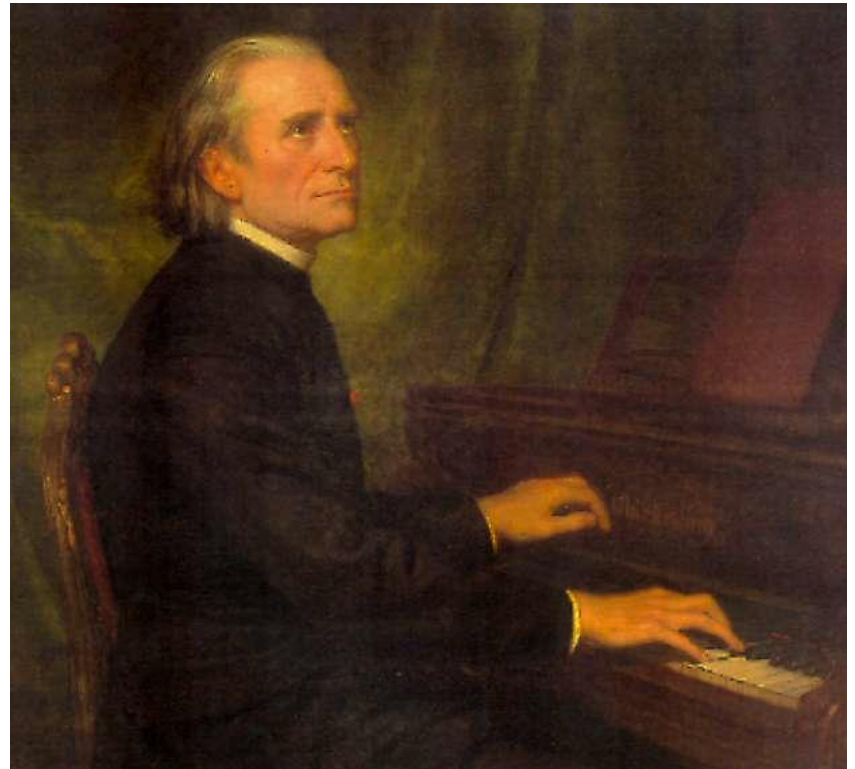
Biography

- Career
 - Learned Roma (Gypsy) music, age 17
 - From Ede Reményi.
 - Let to lucrative *Hungarian Dances* years later.
 - Sent compositions to Robert Schumann
 - They were returned unopened.



Biography

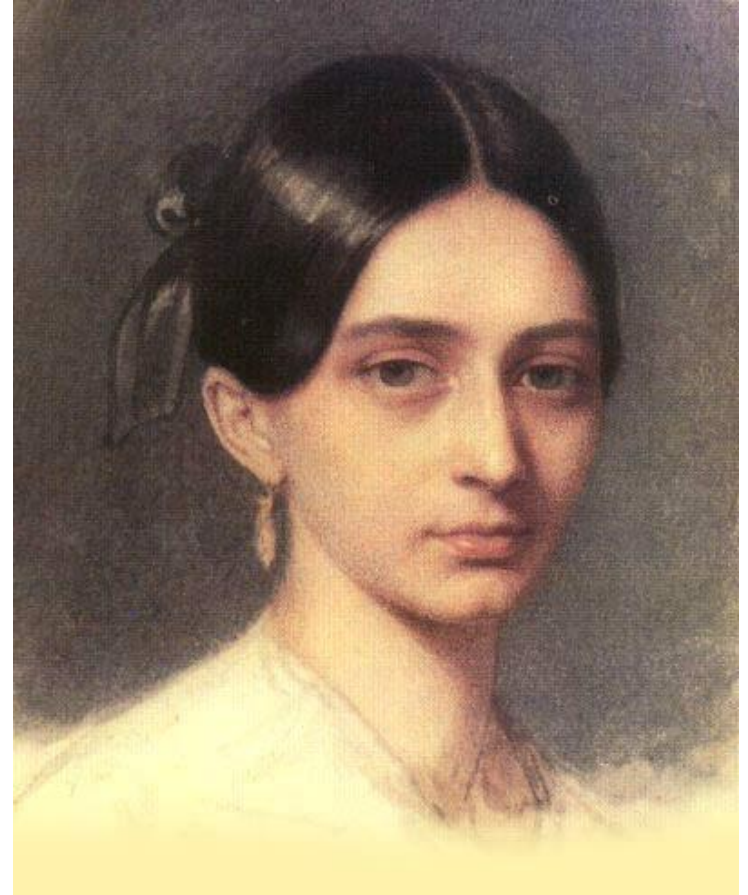
- Career
 - Met Franz Liszt, age 20
 - Fell asleep while listening to Liszt play his own music.
 - Never cared for Liszt's compositions.



Franz Liszt

Biography

- Career
 - Introduced to Robert Schumann, age 20
 - Clara Schumann welcomed him at the door, praised his talents to Robert.
 - Brahms had a crush on Clara (as did many others).
 - It intensified in later years, but never consummated.



Clara Schumann

Biography

- **Career**

- **His big break**

- Robert Schumann was impressed and promoted Brahms' career.

- **Became financially well-off**

- Gave him the freedom to write what he wanted.
 - Lived frugally and contributed to aspiring musicians.
 - Took care of Robert's family when he (Robert) entered insane asylum.



Robert Schumann

Biography

- **Career**
 - Finished the *Requiem*, age 33
 - Established his reputation as a first-rate composer.
 - **First symphony, age 43**
 - Several years in the making.
 - Saw Beethoven's symphonies as a hard act to follow.
 - Grew his famous Victorian beard, age 45.



Biography

- Career

- Fourth symphony, age 52.

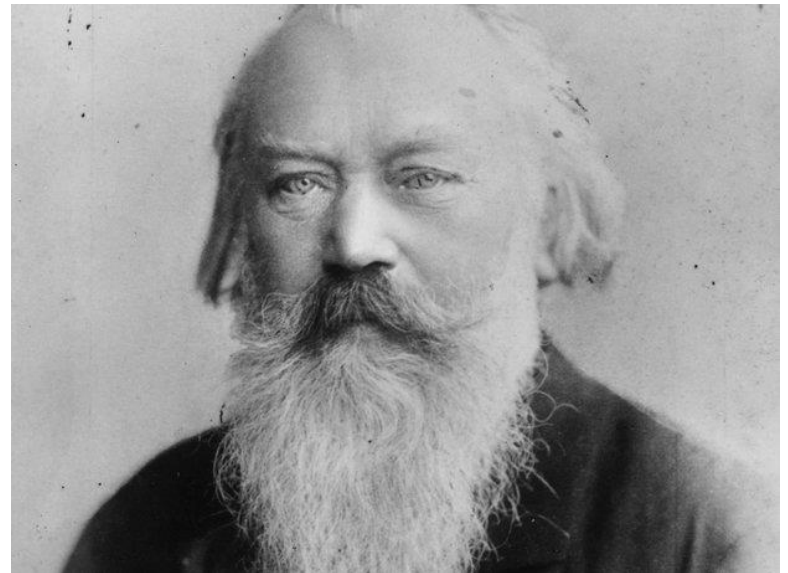
- By now, regarded as one of the “Three Bs” (Bach, Beethoven, Brahms)

- Thanks to conductor Hans von Bülow

- Late works, 60s.

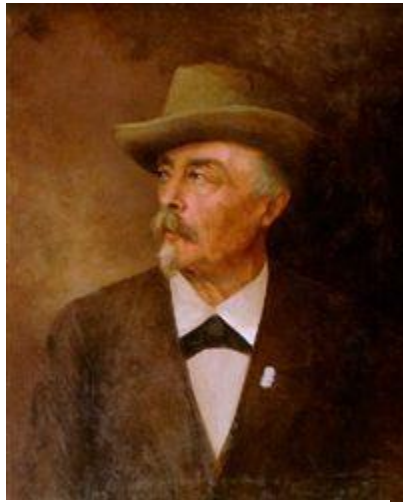
- Some of his best creations.
 - Clarinet quintet, 2 clarinet sonatas, chorale preludes.
 - *Four Serious Songs*, on death of Clara Schumann.

- More pessimistic view than the *Requiem*.

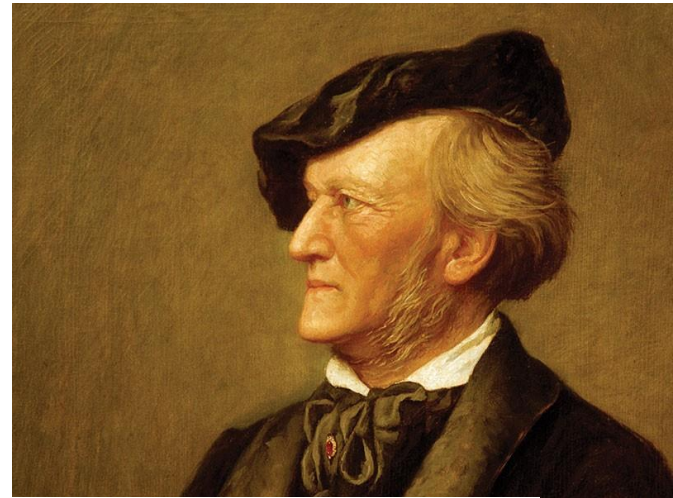


Biography

- Approach to composition
 - Seen as a traditionalist.
 - ...as opposing the new school of Liszt and Wagner.
 - He hated Liszt, but admired much in Wagner's music
 - Von Bülow promoted both Brahms and Wagner



Hans von Bülow

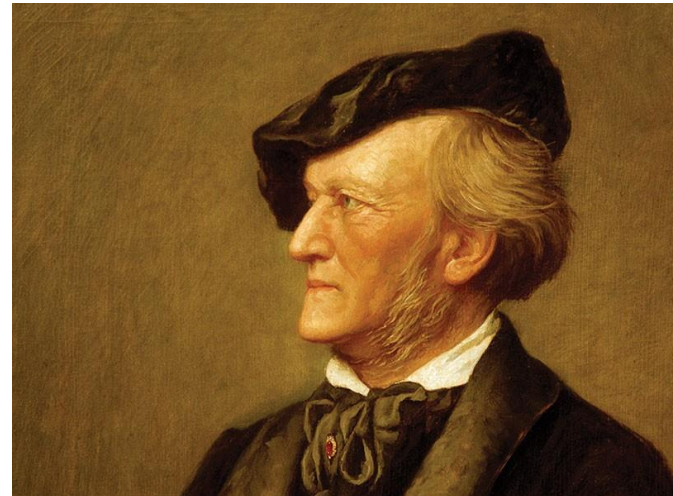


Richard Wagner

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If you hate Wagner, try this:
[Die Meistersinger, Prelude to Act 1](#), Klaus Tennstedt conducting the London Philharmonic in Tokyo.



Richard Wagner

Biography

- Approach to composition
 - Actually, he favored structure and discipline
 - Student of Bach, Beethoven, and polyphonic music.
 - Master of counterpoint, part writing.
 - Self-critical
 - Destroyed many compositions.
 - Including 20 string quartets.
 - Romantic, but not individualist.



A German Requiem

- Why “German”?
 - Text is in the German language
 - From the Luther Bible.
 - Not intended to be nationalistic.
 - Brahms’ well-chosen scriptural passages are especially poignant in Luther’s German.
 - Brahms preferred the title *A Human Requiem*
 - But thought this would be controversial.



A German Requiem

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 - His mother died shortly before he started writing it.
 - This can't be mere coincidence.
 - Yet the music is not about him.

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- A Requiem for the living
 - A humanistic perspective that Brahms hoped could provide comfort.

A German Requiem

- Operates on two levels.

- Obviously romantic.

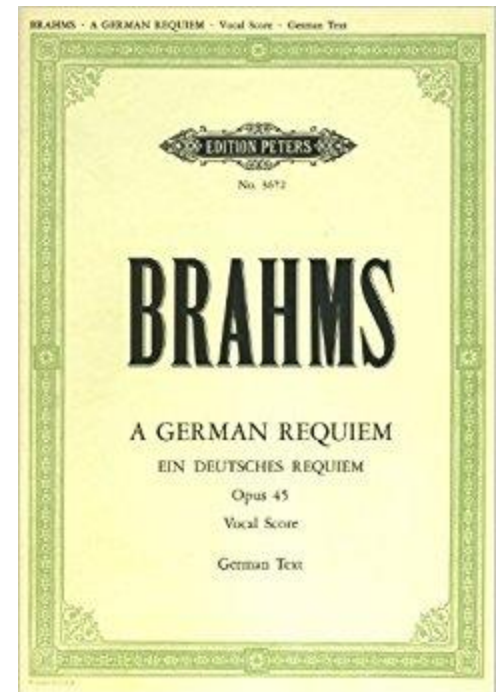
- But it also works on the subconscious level.

- Compare with Frank Lloyd Wright.



A German Requiem

- We examine 3 key sections of the 7:
 - 1. *Selig sind, die da Leid tragen*
 - Blessed are those that mourn... for they shall be comforted
 - 2. *Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras*
 - All flesh is as grass... and the righteousness of man the flower of grass
 - 4. *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen*
 - How lovely are thy dwelling places



Blessed are Those Who Mourn

- From Sermon on the Mount

- *Matthew 5:4*

- Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (*King James Bible*).
 - *Selig sind, die da Leid tragen, denn sie sollen getröstet werden* (*Luther Bible*)

- *Leid tragen* (literally) ≈ carry suffering (pain)

- *Selig* ≈ blissful

- The *Requiem* aims to provide comfort, even bliss, for the living



Blessed are Those Who Mourn

[Audio file](#)

- Opening chorus
 - Preceded by introduction in the low strings
 - No violins
 - Based on Bach Chorale *Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten*.
 - Chorus opens with “*Selig sind...*”
 - Chorus then sings a beautiful chorale, *a cappella* and *pianissimo*, based on the text.
 - What explains the beauty of the chorale? A guess...
 - It follows the classical rules of part writing.
 - Exquisite voice leading.
 - Unconventional harmonic progression that creates a cascade of suspensions.

Audio file

Part Writing

Follows classical rules,
plus exquisite voice leading

Voice-crossing
maintains
ascending lines
and builds
tension,
released by
suspensions

...and
descending
triad motif

SA
Se - lig sind, die da Leid tra - gen,
TB

SA
denn sie sol - len ge - trös - tet wer - den
TB

ge - tros - tet wer - den

Message is repeated

[Audio file](#)

Part Writing

Unconventional harmonic progression yields cascade of suspensions

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Soprano (SA) and Tenor Bass (TB) parts. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system covers the lyrics "Se - lig sind, die da Leid tra - gen,". The second system covers "denn sie sol - len ge - trös - tet wer - den" and "ge - tros - tet wer - den". Red Roman numerals indicate the harmonic progression in the bass line. Orange lines highlight specific melodic lines in the vocal parts.

SA
Se - lig sind, die da Leid tra - gen,
I vi iii vii I vi

TB

SA
denn sie sol - len ge - trös - tet wer - den
iii V⁷ I IV V I

TB
ge - tros - tet wer - den

vi-iii-vii-I in first phrase becomes
vi-iii-V⁷-I in second phrase,
allowing closure.

All Flesh Is as Grass

- Based on saying of prophet Isaiah

- *Isaiah 40:6*

- All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field (*King James Bible*)

- *Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen wie des Grases Blumen* (Luther Bible)

- *Herrlichkeit* \approx nobility

- The divine spark in humankind is as fleeting as the flowers of the field.



All Flesh Is as Grass

[Audio file \(11:15\)](#)

- The fallenness of humankind
 - Slow, awkward tempo
 - A march in 3/4 time?
 - As though slogging through the muck of our mundane existence.
 - Chorus enters with Isaiah's text.
 - On repeat, the volume builds.
 - The chorus enters again – a horrible death march.



Bataan Death March

How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place

- From the Psalms of David

[Audio file \(33:30\)](#)

- *Psalms 84:1,2,4*

- How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!
(*King James Bible*)
- *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen* (Luther Bible)

- Tabernacle ≈
dwelling-place

- Hebrew: מִשְׁכָּן , *mishkan*

- Perennial favorite

- Music in the clouds

- Should be sung in
lilting manner
 - As in opening note.



How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place

- Why this, in a humanist requiem?
 - Human beings can conceive of something better than themselves.
 - Religions often present a vision of a better world.
 - **Isaiah, Jeremiah:** a just society
 - **Jesus:** Kingdom of God (on earth)
 - Brahms saw music as rooted in the same human trait
 - It gives expression for the human desire for perfection.
 - Music is not escape, but an expression of who we are and want to be.