

## A Deeply Moving Choral Work

Module 15 of *Music: Under the Hood*

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## Outline

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

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## 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

- **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.



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## 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

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## 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

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### 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

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### 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.



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### 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*.




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### 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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### Biography

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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

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### 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.**



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## 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.



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## A German Requiem

- Why did Brahms write a requiem?
  - 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.

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## A German Requiem

- Operates on two levels.
  - Obviously romantic.
  - But it also works on the subconscious level.
    - Compare with Frank Lloyd Wright.



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## 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



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### Blessed are Those Who Mourn

- Opening chorus [Audio file](#)
  - 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.


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[Audio file](#)

### Part Writing

Follows classical rules, plus exquisite voice leading

Voice-crossing<sup>SA</sup> maintains ascending lines and builds tension, released by suspensions  
 ...and descending triad motif




Message is repeated

[Audio file](#)

### Part Writing


Unconventional harmonic progression yields cascade of suspensions



vi-iii-vii-I in first phrase becomes vi-iii-V<sup>7</sup>-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** ≈ nobility
    - The divine spark in humankind is as fleeting as the flowers of the field.



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### All Flesh Is as Grass

- The fallenness of humankind [Audio file \(11:15\)](#)
  - 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 \(33:30\)](#)
  - *Psalm 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.

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