

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

Biography

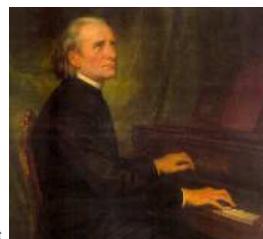
- Career
 - Learned Roma (Gypsy) music, age 17
 - From Ede Reményi.
 - Led to lucrative *Hungarian Dances* years later.
 - Sent compositions to Robert Schumann
 - They were returned unopened.



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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.



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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



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Biography

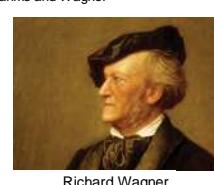
- Approach to composition

- 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

- Approach to composition

- Actually, he favored structure and discipline
 - Student of Bach, Beethoven, and polyphonic music.
 - Master of counterpoint, part writing.



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A German Requiem

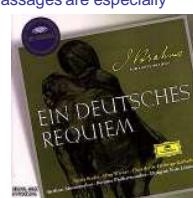
- Why "German"?

- 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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 - But he realized that scriptures contain wisdom of the ages.

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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

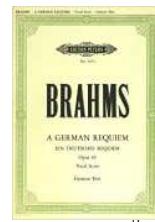
- Operates on two levels.
 - Obviously romantic.
 - But it also works on the subconscious level.
 - Compare with Frank Lloyd Wright.



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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
 - *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
 - 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 SA 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-V7-I in second phrase, allowing closure.

All Flesh Is as Grass

• **Based on saying of prophet Isaiah**

- *Isaiah 61:1-3*
 - All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field (*King James Bible*)
 - *Denn alles Fleisch 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](#)

- 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 death march.

Bataan Death March 23

How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place

• **From the Psalms of David** [Audio file](#)

- *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: *מִשְׁמָרָה*, *mishkan*
- **Perennial favorite**
- **Music in the clouds**
 - Should be sung in *lifting* manner
 - As in opening note.

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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 to the human desire for perfection.