

## A Deeply Moving Choral Work

Module 15 of *Music: Under the Hood*

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August 2017

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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.
- 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.
- Became financially well-off
  - Gave him the freedom to write what he wanted.
  - Lived frugally and contributed to aspiring musicians.



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

### • 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

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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.

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## A German Requiem

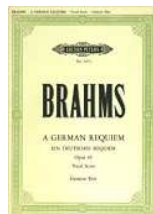
- Operates on two levels.
  - Obviously romantic.
  - But it also works on the subconscious level.
    - Compare with Frank Lloyd Wright.



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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



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## 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

[Audio file](#)

- **Opening chorus**
  - **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-V<sup>7</sup>-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

[Audio file](#)

- **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 death march.

Bataan Death March 23

## How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place

[Audio file](#)

- **From the Psalms of David**
  - **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.

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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.