

PROGRAM NOTES

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The relationship between the two composers of the late 19th-century, Johannes Brahms (1833-97) of Germany, and Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) of Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) was both professional and personal. The works presented in this concert were generated by their religious response to human suffering (of someone close to them) and death – but these works serve to illuminate their completely different faith understandings. Both works, Brahms' *Requiem*, and Dvořák's *Biblical Songs*, have long stood as examples of the greatest creative genius of each composer. (Dvořák himself described the set as “the best I have ever written in this genre.”)

Karl Geiringer, one of Brahms' biographers (*Brahms; His Life and Work*, 1934 (German), 1936 (English), rev. 1961) summarizes the relationship with Dvořák succinctly: “As a member of a committee for the granting of scholarships [annual stipends for promising artists], he had received a work from this wholly unknown composer [Dvořák]. Brahms procured him the scholarship; persuaded Simrock [a well-known music publisher in Berlin] to publish his works; influenced conductors and soloists to perform those compositions; found time to correct the proofs carefully before they went to press, [when] the composer himself was unable to do so; and repeatedly offered him material help, to lighten the burden of his poverty.” Gradually, as Dvořák established his reputation, also, like Brahms, achieving international fame, the relationship matured into a loving friendship built on their initial mutual admiration and respect. Nevertheless, Dvořák continued to address Brahms as “Esteemed Master and Friend” in correspondence and a number of his works show Brahms' influence. Brahms read Dvořák's scores and attended concerts of his music, Dvořák did likewise with respect to Brahms; they visited and corresponded frequently – sometimes sending greetings through the letters of others. When Dvořák learned of Brahms' serious illness, he went to visit him in Vienna; it was their last meeting, for Brahms died a few weeks later.

Biblické písně / Biblical Songs, Op. 99, Nos. 5, 4, 3.

Dvořák was in the United States, serving as the Director of the National Conservatory of Music (1892-95), when he learned of the deaths of close colleagues, Tchaikovsky (Nov. 6, 1893), the conductor, Hans von Bülow (Feb. 12, 1894), and at the same time of his father's serious illness. He composed the set of 10 *Biblical Songs* for low voice and piano, March 5-26, 1894, three months after the New York premiere of his *New World Symphony* (No. 9); his father died March 28th. Dvořák orchestrated the first five songs, which were premiered in Prague on January 4, 1896 with the composer conducting.

All ten of the *Biblical Songs* are based on selections from the book of Psalms. Today's performance consists of the last three of the ones orchestrated by the composer (numbers 6-10 were orchestrated by the conductor, Vilém Zemánek). The texts were taken from the Kralice Bible, the first translation into Czech (1613) and the one known to Dvořák from his childhood. All come from the Book of Psalms, the lyrical outpourings and reflections of ancient Israel – some songs of thanksgiving, some laments, others from Temple liturgy. Why did Dvořák choose these texts? Although he did not explain, his choices reflect an acceptance of the attributes of God as depicted by the Psalmist and the proper human response (like the Psalmist's) to God's Being and Creation. This is the bedrock of Dvořák's faith: realization of personal blessings amidst the potential perils of the world and grateful response – as well as the confidence of loving care in the life to come beyond this world. Dvořák was a man who knew personal sorrow and loss (his first three children died young) but maintained the confidence of the Catholic faith he was taught – hence his ability to rejoice in the good while acknowledging the tragic. Dvořák did not hesitate to shape the text for the purpose of his settings, repeating words, eliminating phrases, etc., showing his complete familiarity and comfort with biblical material. The most helpful translations in English are from the New Revised Standard Version or the New Jerusalem Bible, that, unfortunately, do not correspond syllabically with the Czech text.

Biblical Song No. 5 – Psalm 144:9; 145:2,3,5,6 (one word added)

New Jerusalem Bible: God, [God,] I sing to you a new song,
 I play to you on the ten-stringed lyre.
 Day after day I shall bless you,
 I shall praise your name for ever and ever.
 Great is Yahweh [the Lord] and worthy of all praise,
 His greatness beyond all reckoning.
 Your renown is the splendour of your glory,
 I will ponder the story of your wonders.
 They will speak of your awesome power,
 And I shall recount your [all of your] greatness.

The form is that of four stanzas with introduction, interludes between stanzas and closing. The fourth stanza has the most deviation, building rhythmically, harmonically, and dynamically to a climax. We find the emotional and interpretive clue in the introduction, where effervescent joy (rhythm and tempo) leads gradually to a slower, thoughtful, yet positive conclusion – which is the alternate reading of the text: “And I shall meditate on your greatness.” That is: “I rejoice, yet there is a mystery in the totality of your creation.”

Biblical Song No. 4 – Psalm 23: 1-4

New Revised Standard: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
 He leads me beside still waters;
 He restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 For his name’s sake.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
 for You are with me;
 Your rod and your staff—
 they comfort me.

Almost a free-flowing form, the setting starts with a meditative recitative, leading into a simple pastoral song “Na pastvách zelených” (in green pastures), returning at the middle of the next verse “vodí mne po stezkách” and then at the end “a prut Tvůj a hůl Tvá”. The interludes are filled with imitated bird calls and the birds have the last word. Bohumil Fidler, the composer and choirmaster in Příbram (near Dvořák’s summer residence in Vysoká) noted that Dvořák “was also a great lover of singing birds. At home and in the garden arbour at Vysoká he used to have a great many cages with songsters, mostly thrushes, and always when they sang he would say to me: ‘Do you hear them? How they sing! They are the real masters!’ One beautiful summer evening, ... all the song-birds of the forest, as if at a word of command, started their evening concert. [Dvořák], affected, sat down on a bench and said: ‘Sit down, comrade, and listen: it is divinely beautiful!’”

Biblical Song No. 3 – Psalm 55: 1,2,4,6,7,8 (2,3,5,7,8,9, Kralice Bible)

New Revised Standard: Give ear to my prayer, O God;
 do not hide yourself from my supplication.
 Attend to me, and answer me,
 I am troubled in my complaint..
 I am distraught...
 My heart is in anguish within me,
 the terrors of death have fallen upon me,
 And I say ‘O that I had wings like a dove!
 I would fly away and be at rest;
 truly, I would flee far away;

I would lodge in the wilderness;
I would hurry to find a shelter for myself
from the raging wind and tempest.'

Dvořák's opera experience comes to the fore: this is a scene with a monologue by the Psalmist (or protagonist). Over an uneasy accompaniment, the voice begins a soloiloquy [*scena*], moving through remote and disquieting harmonies over a steady "heartbeat" rhythm, building to a climax on the word "hrůza" (terror), then transitioning into the wingbeats of a dove (word-painting), until the word "prudkému" (tempest) precipitates the final musical illustration in the accompaniment. The ending is quiet, far from fear[of death].

Ein deutsches Requiem / A German Requiem, Op.45

"The *German Requiem* is not only Brahms's greatest vocal work, but also the central work of his career," writes Heinz Becker in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (article, "Brahms, Johannes"); and he is not alone in so estimating this work over which Brahms labored from 1857 to 1868. Its genesis appears to have been connected to the attempted suicide and then the death of his dear friend and mentor, to whom he owed so much, Robert Schumann (1810-56). Brahms worked and re-worked the musical material until it took penultimate shape in 1865, when he sent a movement from "a kind of German Requiem" (Brahms' words) in 1865 to Clara Schumann, Robert's wife and musician in her own right. It was the fourth movement, which pleased Clara very much. In 1865 Brahms' mother, to whom he was deeply devoted, died; and in 1866 Brahms completed the score of what are now movements 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7, with a first performance conducted by him in the Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday, 1868. Clara was in the audience and, as she described in a letter, "The Requiem quite overpowered me... [it] has taken hold of me as no sacred music ever did before. ... The baton was really a magic wand and its spell was upon all present. It was a joy such as I have not felt for a long time." The new movement, inserted as the fifth, was added by Brahms a month after the first performance and in time for the first printed version. The newly completed *German Requiem* was performed in September, 1868 in Zurich; it firmly established Brahms' reputation as a composer of the first rank.

The full title of the work, *Ein deutsches Requiem/ A German Requiem* presents a puzzle that has stimulated much scholarly and analytical research. The word "Requiem" refers to the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead, which, up to recent times, was sung entirely in Latin to a prescribed text. Brahms selected his own texts from various parts of the German Bible (see above), arranging them in a scheme that hints at his own personal theological understanding of the meaning of human suffering, death, life, afterlife and God. That his Protestant faith was not simply received and believed without question and searching has been shown by his copiously annotated personal Bible. Nevertheless, Dvořák's son-in-law, Joseph Suk, recalled Dvořák's reaction, when, after a long conversation with Brahms, Suk, and Mrs. Dvořák about faith and religion, he exclaimed, "Such a man, such a soul—and he believes in nothing, he believes in nothing!" Dvořák's distress aside, we can discern a more complicated approach to faith on Brahms' part, compared with Dvořák, along with a strong base of Christian – particularly North German Protestant - culture. As for "German," at one point Brahms remarked that it really was a "human" Requiem. That the work continues to move profoundly hearers and performers alike regardless of language and culture indicates that he was correct.

In its overall shape, Brahms' *Requiem* follows the practice of composers who set the Latin Mass in that musical material from the first movement returns in the last movement; otherwise, each movement is individually conceived for balance, contrast, and to pursue different aspects of two theological themes: The Eternal Promise and Consolation/Comfort. The texts are chosen primarily to address the life of the living, not the fate of the dead (other than in apocalyptic allusion).

I. *Selig sind, die da Leid tragen/ Blessed are those who mourn.*

Chorus and
Orchestra

Tempo: Ziemlich langsam und mit Ausdruck; Key: F major.
Texts: A = Matthew 5: 4; B = Psalm 126: 5-6.

In this opening movement, set in three-part form (A B A', where A' indicates an alteration rather than an exact repeat), Brahms introduces his two textual subjects: consolation/comfort, and eternal promise. After a mysterious orchestral introduction, during which the low bass tones softly emphasize the inexorable beat of time, the chorus enters softly with the words from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, "Selig sind..."/"Blessed are those who mourn" – at which point – time stops. The effect is one of celestial voices seeming to arise out of nothing – contrasted with the low, "earthly" instrumental voices (minus the violins throughout the movement). The insistence is that the sorrowful will find comfort. The middle section (B) sets a psalm text describing the promise to those who work faithfully – that reward and joy will surely come. Although not tonal painting in the classic sense, the vocal lines of "Die mit Thränen..."/"Those who sow in tears," seem to sigh, and are answered by the lightly dancing phrases, "werden mit Freuden..."/"will reap with joy." The movement closes with the soaring, then whispered emphasis "getröstet werden"/"they will be comforted."

II. *Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras/ For all flesh is like grass* Chorus and Orchestra

Tempo: (A) Langsam, marschmässig; Key: Bb minor;
 (B) Etwas bewegter; Key Gb major; (A return)
 (C) Un poco sostenuto; Key: Bb major; Allegro non troppo.
 Texts: A = I Peter 1: 24; B = James 5: 7; C = I Peter 1: 25; Isaiah 35:10.

This movement, the "oldest" of the seven, can be understood as an extension and intensification of the biblical/theological themes from the first movement. The texts (A & B) describe the transience of human life according to the pattern of nature, then asserting the need for patience like that of a farmer who plants and cultivates then waits for that which will surely come. The opening part (A) is a slow march, reminiscent of a funeral procession (note the timpani rhythm and the trudging dirge-like bass line): "Denn alles Fleisch..."/"For all flesh is like grass..." Note the anguished sigh of "abgefallen"/"fallen." Then, the promise (B) "So seid nun geduldig"/"Be patient, therefore...until the [future] of the Lord" expressed by the chorus (that is almost unaccompanied at first) dances again lightly in a contrasting major key, unweighted by the lower bass notes. The return to (A) ends on a single held low tone followed by a sudden shout of affirmation, heralding the promise (section C) "Aber"/"But (yet)..." The Word of the Lord is not transient, the promise to the faithful is sure: "Die Erlöseten des Herrn..."/"The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing." Chorus and orchestra join in a confident victory parade complete with fanfares, emphasizing "ewige Freude"/"eternal joy" and refuting "Schmerz und seufzen"/"sorrow and sighing." The last words are "ewige Freude"/"eternal joy" that float over a subsiding orchestra.

III. *Herr, lehre doch mich/ Lord, let me know my end* Baritone, Chorus and Orchestra

Tempo: Andante moderato; Key: D minor; D major
 Texts: A = Psalm 39: 4-5; B = Psalm 39: 6-8; C = Wisdom of Solomon (Apocrypha)

3:1

An anguished cry from the soloist (the individual) opens the movement, "Herr..."/"Lord let me know my end;" it is repeated by the chorus (all humankind), continuing and increasing the intensity of despair, as the work moves from examining the common destiny of all humankind (in movement II) to anxiety about one's personal destiny. The movement builds to an unresolved climax on the bleak question "Nun Herr..."/"And now, O Lord, what am I to hope for?" A sudden pivot on one low instrumental note to the major key changes the mood to hope: "Ich hoffe auf dich"/"My hope is in you [God]," a slowly rising melody by overlapping voices, moving swiftly to a massive fugue with a countermelody by instruments: "Der Gerechten Seelen..."/"The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God." Throughout the 36 bars, a low tone (D, the tonic note) continuously sounds, so that the increasing feeling of energy, fueled by the discordance of the voices against the note, still remains firmly fastened,

finally bringing voices and orchestra into harmony with the note, illustrating the conviction that hope anchors faith and life and brings all into harmony with the eternal plan of God.

IV. *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen/ How lovely is your dwelling place* Chorus and Orchestra

Tempo: Mässig bewegt; Key: E♭ major
Text: Psalm 84:1,2,4

This, the most well-known movement of the Requiem, appears in the repertory of many church choirs. As a musical evocation of the beauty of heaven to Western European and American ears, it can scarcely be matched. “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen”/ “How lovely is your dwelling place...” (“Herr Zebaoth” can best be translated as “Lord of hosts.”) The melodic lines soar upward and arch gracefully in a fluid waltz, delineating a pristine edifice in sound. A short fugal section recalls the hymns of praise of the heavenly choirs, “die loben dich immerdar”/“who praise you evermore,” with the emphasis on “immerdar”/ “evermore.” The movement closes with a return of the opening section as a short coda.

V. *Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit/ You have pain now* Soprano, Chorus and Orchestra

Tempo: Langsam; Key: G major
Texts: John 16:22; Ecclesiasticus 51:27 (Apocrypha); Isaiah 66:13

For the first time a voice directly addresses the listener, “Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit...”/“You now have sorrow, but I will see you again.” Commentators believe that the voice is associated with Brahms’ mother (who died in 1865), a suggestion given weight by the subsequent choral text, (Isaiah), “Ich will euch trösten...”/“I will comfort you as a mother comforts her child,” based on the opening melody by the strings and continued in the orchestra. A halo of strings (muted) surrounds the solo soprano voice as the chorus repeats her words in augmentation. The word “Traurigkeit”/“Sorrow” at times, in its tortured melodic line reflects anguish, but it is superseded by unalloyed gladness and comfort (signaled by the words “Trost” and trösten”) shining in a setting of intimacy and love. At the end, the chorus’ last words are “Ich will euch trösten”/“I will comfort you,” but the soprano’s last words – lasting one beat longer than the chorus - are “wieder sehen”/“I will see you again.”

VI. *Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt/ For here we have no lasting city* Baritone, Chorus and Orchestra

Tempo: (A) Andante; Key: C minor; (B) Vivace; C minor; (C) Allegro; C major
Texts: (A) Hebrews 13:14 and I Corinthians 15:51-52; (B) I Corinthians 15:54-55;
(C) Revelation 4:11.

Moving from an immediate personal concern about the transience of an individual’s worldly life to a faithful human’s life beyond death – to becoming part of the final and inevitable triumph of God’s plan - is a weighty subject, calling for the most dramatic and lengthy movement in this entire work. The chorus begins with a steady march toward that final goal “Denn wir haben hie...”/“For here we have no lasting city,” when the soloist announces a mystery (Geheimnis). Illustrating the words “plötzlich,” “in einem Augenblick”/ “quickly,” “in the twinkling of an eye,” the chorus with the soloist charge at the trumpet sound (the End Time) (B) and raise shouts of triumph over Death (Tod) and Hell (Hölle). The final section (C), introduced by the altos, “Herr, du bist würdig”/“Worthy are you, Lord our God,” is built on a fugue of grandeur evoking the apocalyptic vision of the Revelation text (C) where all the voices of Eternity and Creation unite to sing the praises of God. The fugal theme

is as solid, at times as soaring as a Gothic cathedral, the entries of the voices powerful, with a florid countermelody, reminiscent of a Bach organ fugue.

VII. *Selig sind die Toten/ Blessed are the dead*
Orchestra

Chorus and

Tempo: Feierlich; Key: F major
Text: Revelation 14:13

Finally the promise outlined in movement I has been completed – not only the living (movement I) but the dead will be comforted and transformed; life with its labor and sorrow is no longer bound or limited by death. Therefore this movement, while hearkening back to the theme from movement I is not a return but a fulfillment – it begins with the closing theme of that movement, now applied apocalyptically on the other side of death, “getröstet werden”/ “shall be comforted” (Movement I) now becomes, “Selig sind die Toten”/“Blessed are the dead.” These words are also part of the Lutheran funeral service that Brahms knew well. The violins now join the rest of the orchestra, lending a “height” to the sound. No longer do the voices float, unaccompanied, but interchange with, and appropriate, orchestral themes: heaven and earth are united in an aura of peace. The last word is the assurance of blessedness: “selig,” as the harp arpeggio, like a dove, flutters heavenward.