

# Brahms and Schoenberg

**Performed October 21, 2001**

The pairing of Johannes Brahms and Arnold Schoenberg on the same concert bill may at first seem like the ultimate musical odd couple, but the two composers actually have a great deal in common. Although Schoenberg was certainly more revolutionary in his approach, both sought to expand the musical palette beyond what was conventional, and it was Schoenberg in fact who first recognized Brahms as a progressive force in music. Both men adhered to strict musical principles in composition, placing musical substance above style. The music of both composers was often considered overly intellectual by some of their contemporaries, yet they were capable of music of great emotional power. And the two works in this concert, Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem* and Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, are both powerfully moving testaments to faith, human dignity and the indomitable human spirit.

## *A Survivor from Warsaw*

Although he was one of the most influential composers and teachers of the twentieth century, Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) was largely self-taught and struggled to make a living from his compositions for much of his life. He owed much of his early success to Alexander von Zemlinsky, a composer, conductor and protégé of Brahms, who arranged the first performance of one of Schoenberg's works in 1897, helped support him (it was the least he could do — Schoenberg had married his sister), and found him a job as a music teacher. Schoenberg's early music was clearly influenced by Brahms and the late Romantics, but it already had a strong flavor of chromaticism which foreshadowed his later development of atonal and serial music. Even his early works were somewhat controversial (his string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* was repeatedly rejected for performance), but he eventually found strong supporters in Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler, which ensured that his works would at least be heard.



In 1926 Schoenberg had moved from Vienna to Berlin to take up a post at the Prussian Academy of Music. Raised as an orthodox Jew, Schoenberg had converted to Lutheranism as a young man, but he began a gradual return to Judaism as he grew older. With the rise of Nazism in Germany, Schoenberg abruptly resigned his position in Berlin in 1933 and fled to France, where he also made a formal return to the Jewish faith. He emigrated to America the next year, eventually settling in Los Angeles where he taught at UCLA.

In the early twentieth century many composers were struggling to expand music beyond the bounds imposed by classical harmonic theory. Debussy experimented with exotic whole-tone scales; Stravinsky embraced dissonance and polytonality (music of different keys played simultaneously.) Schoenberg found his solution in atonal music, music

which is not based on the harmonic structure of a musical key signature. Schoenberg soon realized that even atonal music required some organizational principle and he developed the technique of serial or 12-tone music. The tone row is a sequence of the twelve pitches which comprise the chromatic scale, and the music develops by repetition of these pitches in unvarying order. Within this repetition the composer can freely vary the rhythm, octave in which the pitch appears, the instrument or voice to whom the pitch is given, and can play the tone row in reverse order or upside down or even simultaneously in chords. Serial music is not necessarily dissonant or unmelodic, and though the technique may appear quite artificially constrained, it is no more so than any other art form which conforms to strict rules of construction, be it a Bach fugue or a Shakespeare sonnet. By the time he emigrated to America Schoenberg had begun to move away from strict formalism in his serial music and his later music, including *A Survivor from Warsaw*, is more expansive.

Schoenberg began *A Survivor from Warsaw* in 1947. He compiled the text from a number of accounts of Holocaust survivors who visited him following the war. It doesn't represent a particular, specific event but rather is meant to stand as an archetype for the experiences of Jews caught up in the Holocaust. The story unfolds as men in the Warsaw Ghetto are rousted from bed and formed into a line to be led to the gas chambers. The soldier in charge laughingly orders them to count off, telling them he wants to know how many he has killed that day. As they count off, the men suddenly begin to sing as one the Shema Yisrael, the prayer which embodies the central tenet of the Jewish faith. It is an incredibly powerful affirmation of faith and human dignity in the face of unthinkable brutality and depravity.

## *Ein Deutsches Requiem*

When we think of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) we probably picture the familiar portly, bearded, grandfatherly figure, walking the streets of Vienna with hands clasped behind his back; the immensely popular composer of orchestral works who inherited the mantle of Beethoven and who defines for us the essence of Romanticism. Whatever the validity of this picture, it does not represent Brahms at the time of the *German Requiem*. Most of the works by which he is known today — the four *Symphonies*, *Violin Concerto*, *Double Concerto*, *Second Piano Concerto*, *Academic Festival Overture* — were all composed after the *German Requiem*. In many respects, the *German Requiem* was a coming of age piece for Brahms. At the time of the *German Requiem*, Brahms was far better known as a pianist and conductor than a composer, and it was this piece which firmly established his reputation as a major composer and marked the end of what was essentially a long and self-imposed apprenticeship period.

Brahms' previous forays into large-scale orchestral composition had not met with great success. Encouraged by Robert Schumann, Brahms had begun work on a massive D minor symphony in 1854 but was unable to resolve its difficulties. He reworked some of the material into his *Piano Concerto No. 1*, which was premiered in 1859 with Brahms as soloist. This was not the bravura showcase that the public expected and both the concerto and Brahms' playing were roundly criticized. Brahms retreated to music on a more

intimate scale — piano pieces, chamber music, songs and choral works, the latter reinforced by his tenures as conductor of the Hamburg Women's Chorus and the Vienna Singakademie.

Brahms began the *German Requiem* in 1865 shortly after the death of his mother. Within two months he had sketched out four movements, but the work had a typically long Brahmsian gestation period and was not ready for performance until 1867. Brahms somewhat reluctantly agreed to let Johann von Herbeck and the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna's premiere ensemble, perform the first three movements, probably in part because Brahms hoped to succeed the aging Herbeck as music director of the Gesellschaft. The performance was less than a success. The conservative, Catholic Viennese did not know what to make of Brahms' nontraditional choice of text and the timpanist, misreading Brahms' markings, thundered away during the fugue which closes the third movement. Critical response was mixed but lively, and the beginnings of the Brahms versus Wagner camps date from this time.

Brahms meanwhile had been arranging the premiere of the full work (which at that time comprised six movements) under his own direction at the cathedral in Bremen on Good Friday, April 10, 1868. The premiere was well publicized, drawing a large audience including many prominent musicians, and was an immense success. The work was published almost immediately, with Brahms adding an additional movement, placed fifth in sequence, for soprano and chorus. Within a few years the *Requiem* had been performed all across Germany and Austria and had reached as far as Paris, London and St. Petersburg. Brahms' reputation as a major composer had been firmly established, and perhaps more importantly to him, he had finally fulfilled Schumann's prediction of greatness made some fifteen years earlier.

Brahms' selection of text for the *German Requiem* was quite unconventional. Rather than setting the familiar Latin Mass for the Dead, he instead carefully selected texts from the Lutheran translation of the bible emphasizing consolation and acceptance. The texts avoid explicit Christian theology; in fact the name Jesus Christ never even appears and Brahms suggested that he might well have substituted "human" for "German" in the title. Perhaps it is the universality of the feelings expressed in the texts Brahms so carefully chose which makes this requiem so deeply moving.

When Brahms was once told that his *First Symphony* was being referred to as Beethoven's Tenth, he gruffly replied "Well, any ass can see that much." For if he looked backward it was beyond Beethoven to the music of the Baroque and Renaissance, and he used elements of that music not only as structural models but also to expand his harmonic palette.

In its final form the *German Requiem* has a rather symmetrical construction. The first and last movements are quiet and introspective, with their similar texts dealing with consolation and acceptance. The second and sixth movements contain the most dramatic music and both end with massive choral statements. The third and fifth feature the

baritone and soprano soloists with the chorus quietly adding assent. All surround the beautifully lyrical central movement.

The *German Requiem* is based on a chorale tune, *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* (He who waits upon the loving God), although Brahms never explicitly quotes the material. It appears first in the arch-like orchestral music that opens the first movement. The chorus enters *a cappella* in a countersubject with a typically Brahmsian long melodic line. Brahms accomplishes the difficult feat of giving both the chorus and orchestra music of equal weight and importance here and throughout the *German Requiem*. The second movement opens with an eerie funeral march in three quarter time based on material from the abandoned D-minor symphony. The chorus enters with a unison countermelody, again loosely derived from the chorale tune.

The third movement evolves rather freely in form, opening with the baritone solo reflecting on the transitory nature of earthly life and the chorus softly echoing his words. The *durchkomponiert* character of this movement may also represent an homage to Schumann, who developed that style in his lieder. The movement ends with a massive fugue, one of two in the *German Requiem*. Brahms already had a reputation as a musical antiquarian from his Singakademie concerts, which had heavily featured Renaissance and Baroque music, not necessarily to the delight of his audiences as early music was rarely performed and was considered somewhat uncouth at that time. His extensive use of such antique techniques as polyphony and counterpoint perplexed his supporters and led his critics to pan his music as unnecessarily intellectual. Brahms, however, had sound musical reasons for everything he did, and he clearly understood how the musical form of the fugue would enhance the effect of text. Brahms had carefully chosen texts expressing what he considered the essence of faith, and the repetition created in the fugal form provides a powerful sense of reinforcement and affirmation. Brahms' musical treatment of this fugue, however, is anything but Baroque. He maintains a D pedal throughout the fugue, which introduces unusual tension during the fugue's development but also provides a strong sense of resolution at its conclusion.

The intensely lyrical fourth movement provides an emotional high point for the *Requiem*, like a Brahmsian vision of heaven. Brahms uses a variety of rhythmic devices to diffuse the waltz-like character of the music. The fifth movement, shortest of the seven, is built around a soaring soprano solo and the very moving text "I will comfort you as one whom a mother comforts."

The sixth movement, like the second, opens with a march-like section "For we have no abiding place here," but the baritone quickly introduces the most dramatic music in the *Requiem*, set to the familiar text of the last trumpet sounding and the dead being raised. The intensity builds as the chorus enters, reaching a magnificent climax with the text "Death, where is your sting! Hell, where is your triumph!" before closing with a final, majestic fugue.

The final movement opens with a chorale-like melody of great nobility, again set against a beautiful orchestral counterpoint. The text echoes that of the opening movement as

well, and at the end Brahms reprises the opening music of the first movement, but now in the key of E-flat. After a brilliant series of modulations Brahms returns to the opening key of F as well, and the *Requiem* ends quietly on the same word *selig* (blessed) with which it began.

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