

The end of the year is a time to reflect on man's mortality and prepare for the coming (Advent) of the Messiah. Musically, this time before Advent is the time of requiems, while passion compositions such as Bach's *Matthew Passion*, belong to the season of Lent and the Holy Week. Well known requiems, for example those of Mozart, Berlioz and Verdi, were written according to Roman Catholic liturgy in Latin as mass for the dead. In the Protestant tradition, on the other hand, works such as Schütz's *Musical Exequies*, Bach's *Actus Tragicus*, Handel's *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline* are based on individually compiled biblical texts and church hymns in vernacular to express faith and hope of the living.

The *German Requiem* of Johannes Brahms (1833-97) stands clearly in the tradition of Schütz, Bach and Handel. Furthermore, his texts are selected solely from the Bible in Luther's German translation. The choice shows Brahms's deep personal faith. He might not be untainted by the romantic and liberal view of religion advocated by Schleiermacher, the "church father of the 19th century" (Dilthey). Nevertheless, at a time when composers like Wagner tried to construct a pseudo religion in their works, Brahms still based his religious compositions mostly on the Bible. He was, since Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, the most important composer of the 19th century to have utilized biblical settings with both quantitative and qualitative significance.

From *Funeral Song*, op.13, to the penultimate *Four Serious Songs*, op. 121, the theme of human mortality appears repeatedly throughout Brahms's oeuvre, with *A German Requiem*, op.45, marking his major breakthrough as a composer. It also became one of his favourite works, and probably the most popular among requiem compositions of the Protestant tradition. Amazed by the fact that Brahms was not even thirty years old when he started composing the *Requiem*, many suggested that there must be some incidents that triggered its composition, like the deaths of his mentor Schumann and his beloved mother, and the wars of that time. These are all plausible speculations. Yet the motivation behind his lifelong occupation with this subject is perhaps the innermost concern of every human being:

"... just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in the way death came to all men, because all sinned...."
(Romans 5:12)

Brahms's *Requiem* urges us to reflect on our own existence and anticipate the second coming of Christ. This timeless message gains intensity at the close of this liturgical year. In his *Requiem*, Brahms confesses not only the sorrow and vanity of mankind, but also the blessing, comfort, peace, joy, and victory in the Lord. May we all have this faith and hope in Him.

"... if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned though that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."
(Romans 5:17)

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While the subject matter of Brahms's *Requiem* is universal, its musical language is correspondingly comprehensive. "Blessed are those who mourn" (I:29 ff.) and "For they will be comforted" (I:37 ff.) are based on the ancient practice of antiphonal and responsorial psalmodies respectively; the unison "For all men are like grass" (II:23 ff.) is reminiscent of medieval chanting; and the motet-like sectional treatment of "My soul yearns" (IV:46 ff.) is typical of the Renaissance. The twin paradigms of the European music tradition, the polyphonic fugue and the homophonic sonata, are also exhibited: e.g., "But the souls of the righteous" (III:173 ff.) and "You are worthy, our Lord and God" (VI:208 ff.) are double fugues in baroque style, whereas classical sonata principles are observed in the tonal disposition of the march in the second movement, and in the sequential development passage about the mystery of the resurrection body in the sixth movement. As is often the case, new freedom arises paradoxically from the root of tradition. Brahms has developed a language that is expressive enough for a variety of human experiences, even the profoundest. Labeled by some in his time as academic and conservative, he is now widely recognized as "Brahms the Progressive" (Schoenberg).

Two notes about tonight's presentation: First, the *Requiem* will be sung not in its German original but in English translation. Brahms once expressed the wish to replace the word "German" in the title with "human." Unlike *Song of Triumph*, op. 55, which is dedicated to the German emperor Wilhelm I, *A German Requiem* has nothing specifically Germanic about it. The word "German" is used merely to distinguish his *Requiem* in the local language from its Roman Catholic counterparts in Latin. Therefore, it should be acceptable and even preferable for it to be sung in translation for the sake of enhancing understanding. Second, the piano duet arrangement by Brahms himself is used instead of the original orchestral version for this presentation. Surely, the wonderful orchestral sound will be missed. Yet it is to be reminded that gramophone record was not available in the 19th century, therefore, it was common practice for people to get acquainted with orchestral pieces through their piano arrangements. Indeed when the *Requiem* was first introduced to England in 1871, it was in a private but prominently casted performance of the piano duet version (pianos played by former teachers at the Royal Academy and chorus conducted by the German singer Julius Stockhausen who sang under Brahms at the premiere). Such "monochrome" yet authentic versions exist for all but one of Brahms's orchestral choral works. They are not just reductions, but idiomatic transcriptions.

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