

Johannes Brahms, *A German Requiem*, Opus 45 (1868)

Abstract

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) was a giant of nineteenth-century German music. He was born in Hamburg, the son of a professional musician, and received early musical training in piano and composition from a distinguished teacher, Eduard Marxsen. He left Hamburg at age nineteen to embark on a career as a professional musician and had the good fortune to carry a letter of introduction to two of the brightest lights of German musical life, composer Robert Schumann (1810–1856) and his wife Clara Schumann (1819–1896), the virtuoso pianist. After hearing Brahms play one of his compositions for the piano, Robert Schumann declared the young man the genius the musical world had been waiting for since Beethoven's death in 1827. Brahms carried this burden for the remainder of his long life. It accounts both for his keenly developed consciousness of the past and his high degree of self-criticism. In 1863, he was appointed conductor of the Vienna Voice Academy. Although he resigned the following year, he chose to remain in the Austrian capital. From 1872 to 1875, he directed the concerts of the Viennese Friends of Music Society. Afterwards, he accepted no formal position, devoting himself to composition and the occasional performance of his own work.

A German Requiem [*Ein deutsches Requiem*] was the first composition to bring Brahms international renown and financial security. Its dominant theme is comfort for the living: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." The work was composed during three major periods in Brahms's life, beginning in the mid-1850s. Most of the *Requiem* was composed after his mother's death in 1865. The fifth movement was added later, after the *Requiem*'s Bremen premiere in 1868. The final version of the work was published in 1869 and performed in Leipzig's Gewandhaus on February 18, 1869.

Source

Text [King James version]

I

Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted.
(Matthew 5:4)

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
bringing his sheaves with him.
(Psalm 126:5,6)

II

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away.
(1 Peter 1:24)

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandmen waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.
(James 5:7)

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

(1 Peter 1:25)

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
(Isaiah 35:10)

III

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am. Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.
And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee.
(Psalm 39:4–7)

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them.
(Wisdom of Solomon 3:1)

IV

How amiable are they tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.

Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee.
(Psalm 84:1,2,4)

V

And ye now therefore have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.
(John 16:22)

Ye see how for a little while I labor and toil, yet have I found much rest.
(Ecclesiasticus 51:27)

As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.
(Isaiah 66:13)

VI

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.
(Hebrews 13:14)

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.
In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.
...then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?
(1 Corinthians 15:51,52,54,55)

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.
(Revelation 4:11)

...Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.
(Revelation 14:13)

Source: Brahms selected the German text from the Lutheran bible. The English text reproduced here is the King James version of the same verses. Both the original German text and the English version can be found online at:

<https://web.stanford.edu/group/SymCh/supplements/brahms-requiem-text.html>

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