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A Study of the Brahms Requiem

Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany. His mother, Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen, was a seamstress from a bourgeois family. His father, Johann Jakob Brahms, was an avid musician. Johann Jakob played the flute, horn, violin, and double bass and made his income by playing on social settings such as dance halls or taverns. Johannes was the middle child with an older sister, Elise, and younger brother, Fritz. Fritz Brahms was also a musician and was a concert pianist and music teacher during his lifetime (Bozarth 2). Johannes took instrumental lessons at a very young age. At age seven, he began to study piano under Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel and took piano and music theory under Eduard Marxsen. Brahms debuted his skills in a chamber concert in 1843 and gave his first solo recitals in 1848 and 1849. Receiving popular attention from these performances, he financially assisted his family by giving private lessons and playing at private gatherings, places for eating and entertainment, accompanying in the theatre, and arranging (Bozarth 2).

Brahms's compositional style has been praised by musicians and he is widely regarded as one of the top Romantic era composers. However, the "Brahms" style seems to involve the styles of other composers. For example, his first piano works, opp. 4, 2, 1, and 5 involve the motivic development of Bach and Beethoven and the harmony and thematic transformation of Liszt and Chopin (Frisch 19). In the first movement of the Brahms B Major/Minor Piano Trio op.8, Frisch writes, "The main theme of the first movement has a breadth and tunefulness reminiscent of

Schubert; the hymn-like theme of the Adagio seems inspired by Beethoven; and the propulsive Scherzo is Mendelssohnian in spirit” (23). In addition, his piano quartet in G minor op. 25 has a tonal reversal that is very similar to that of the first movement of Schubert’s G Major String Quartet D887 (Frisch 23). During the first movement of Brahms’s A Major Piano Quartet, there is an episode that Frisch describes as, “...reminiscent of Schubert's Die Stadt, from Schwanengesang” (24). In addition, Brahms spent a great deal of time with Robert and Clara Schumann. During this period, he shared many of his previous compositions with the Schumann’s and wrote variations on themes by Robert. The compositional techniques of the Schumann’s also influenced Brahms’s compositional style (Bozarth 5). An example of Brahms referencing Schumann is found in the *German Requiem*. In reference to movement three, Van Camp writes, “This movement begins with a short theme that Christopher Reynolds believes to be a reference to Robert Schumann’s *First Symphony*, the ‘Spring’ symphony” (78).

Before approaching the *Brahms Requiem*, it is important to understand what a Requiem is. The Requiem originated in the Roman Catholic tradition as a sung Mass for the departed and commonly occurs for All Souls’ Day on November 2nd. The Requiem began as chants from the Old Roman and Ambrosian rites. There are 105 Requiem chants in the Gregorian repertory but 58 of those are for the Mass for the Dead (Karp 1). From 1545-1563, the Council of Trent placed further limitations on those chants. Karp further writes, “The normative formulary of about 1880 to about 1970 included the introit Requiem aeternam; a very simple, repetitive 6th-mode Kyrie; the gradual Requiem aeternam; tract Absolve Domine; sequence Dies irae; offertory Domine Jesu Christe; nearly syllabic settings of the Sanctus and Agnus Dei; the communion Lux aeterna; and Requiescant in pace. The responsory Libera me may follow the completion of the Requiem Mass” (1).

It is important to note that not every Requiem is the same and many composers include movements that may not be in the original formulary of the Requiem. For example, *Mozart's Requiem* has twelve movements but only the Requiem (which includes the text of the Introit and Kyrie), Dies Irae, Domine Jesu, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei are a part of the original formulary. Mozart added a Tuba Mirum, Rex Tremendae, Recordare, Confutatis, Lacrimosa, Hostias, and Benedictus to his Requiem. The *Fauré Requiem* has seven movements but only the Introit and Kyrie, Offertory, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei are a part of the original formulary. Fauré also added a Pie Jesu, Libera me, and In Paradisum to his Requiem. A final example of how the Requiem may be subject to change is the *Verdi Requiem*. There are seven movements in the *Verdi Requiem* but only the Introit and Kyrie, Dies Irae, Offertory, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Lux Aeterna are a part of the original formulary. Verdi adds a Libera Me movement to conclude his Requiem and rearranges the text throughout the Requiem (Smallman 6-8).

Because the Requiem's purpose is to pray for the departed, the texts are arranged in a certain order to reflect the order of Mass. The Introit text is the people's prayer to God to bless the dead. The text mentions giving eternal rest and shining light upon those that have departed this world. The Kyrie text is the people's prayer to God to forgive themselves. The text is simple and is only three lines; Lord have mercy on us, Christ have mercy on us, Lord have mercy on us. The Sequence (which is the text from Dies Irae) text is about the day of judgement and wrath upon the wicked and cursed. Typically, the music during the Dies Irae movement is always very dramatic to reflect a treacherous and apprehensive emotion. The Offertory (which is the text from the Domine Jesu) text is also the people's prayer to God to deliver the souls of the departed from hell and to not allow the departed to fall into darkness. The Sanctus text declares that heaven and Earth are filled with God's glory and concludes with the exclamation, "Hosanna in

the highest!” The Agnus Dei text repeats the theme that God takes away the sins of the world and to grant mercy on the departed. The Lux Aeterna text is a variation of the Introit text and is a prayer that asks God to shine light and give rest to the departed.

Brahms began working on his Requiem in 1861 and displayed portions of it over a nine-year timeframe. Brahms showcased the first three movements of the Requiem on December 1, 1867 in Vienna, Austria. He next showcased and conducted six movements on April 10, 1868 at the Cathedral of Bremen in Bremen, Germany. When the six-movement piece was premiered, Carl Reinthaler, the organist at the Cathedral of Bremen, had told Brahms that there needed to be a seventh movement that involved the achievement of redemption through Jesus Christ. Thus, the final showcase was the full seven-movement piece on February 18, 1869 in Leipzig, Germany (Keller 1).

Many composers create a setting of the Requiem because they were commissioned to do so; this is certainly the case for composers such as Mozart and Berlioz. However, Brahms was not commissioned to compose his Requiem, so while a definitive motive has not been identified, there are a couple theories. Robert Schumann, a mentor to Brahms, had thought of composing a Requiem in German and could have possibly mentioned the idea to Brahms. One theory is that the mental health and eventual death of Schumann may have impacted Brahms’s eventual decision to compose a Requiem in German. However, this theory is slightly unstable because Schumann died in 1856 and Brahms did not begin to compose his Requiem until 1861. A more probable theory is that the death of his mother inspired the creation of the Brahms *German Requiem*. This theory is more likely true because Brahms’s mother died in 1865 and he already began composing the *German Requiem* in 1861. Brahms had suspended the project for four years until this occurrence, but the event of his mother’s death likely ignited the flame for him to place

attention on finishing this work to honor her (Keller 2). This theory was later confirmed by Brahms's English biographer, Florence May, when discussing the seventh movement that Brahms added after the premiere of his six-movement Requiem. "Brahms's first English biographer, Florence May, related that he said that 'when writing [this movement] he had thought of his mother, 'an entirely credible assertion given the text Brahms extracted from Isaiah: 'I will comfort you, as one whom his mother comforts'" (Keller 3).

The *Brahms Requiem* is unique from others in that it does not fit into the common Requiem tradition. The one way it does conform to the traditional Requiem, Parmer describes as the, "... symphonic scope, its central apostrophe to Blessedness in the fourth movement, the difficulties it poses for performers, and its circular return to the first movement in the last" (121). The first way that it does not conform to the Requiem tradition is through its language. Whether it was Mozart, Verdi, Fauré, Duruflé, or Berlioz, the text for their respective Requiems were always in Latin and it was written this way in order to honor the Roman Catholic tradition. Brahms wrote his Requiem in German and even called the full work, *A German Requiem*. His Requiem also does not conform to the Requiem tradition from a theological standpoint. Brahms chooses to avoid the Christian theology of the Requiem and instead uses texts from the Protestant tradition. Parmer writes, "Thus, Brahms's *Requiem* is not a Christian meditation on the souls of the departed, as in the Roman text, but a personal meditation on his own losses (of his youth, Schumann, and his mother) and a search for consolation in the wake of such bereavement" (121). The text that Brahms uses in his Requiem is the most evident difference in comparison to Requiems by other composers. Typically, the text used for Requiems comes from the Roman Catholic Mass which includes the Introit, Kyrie, Dies Irae, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. In addition to avoiding the usage of Latin language and Christian theology, Brahms also avoids

using this sequence of the liturgy entirely. Instead, he decides to leave his own mark on the Requiem tradition and use texts from Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible. These texts both mourn the dead and comfort the living (Schwarm). Bozarth and Frisch write, "The texts are striking for avoiding altogether the notion of redemption through Christ, who is not mentioned at all. The religious sentiment is thus more universal – Brahms said it could be called a 'human' requiem – than denominational" (30). This statement shows how different the *Brahms Requiem* is when comparing it to the standard Requiem tradition. Brahms went against all norms of the standard tradition and wanted his Requiem to be more inclusive and comprehensive by all.

The *Brahms Requiem* instrumentation calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, double harp, violins one and two, violas, cellos, double basses, organ, soprano soloist, baritone soloist, and mixed choir. The first movement is titled, "Selig sind, die da Leid tragen," which translates to, "Blessed are they that mourn." In this movement, Brahms uses the text from Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" and Psalm 126:5-6, "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." Brahms begins by having the third cello, double bass, and organ play on a low F for the entire first page. Thus, establishing a serious mood and leaving the listener uncertain of where the tonality is headed. Eventually, the second cello plays an E-flat while the first cello begins playing the melody in a B-flat major tonality. Soon after, the viola steals the melody from the first cello in a F major tonality. This orchestral introduction sets up the choir to communicate the somber text for those who mourn. Throughout this first movement, Brahms demonstrates the difference between the mourning and comforting through minor and major tonalities; When the text being sung is "Blessed are they that mourn," Brahms writes in a

minor tonality to establish a somber mood for the mourning. When the text being sung is, "... for they shall be comforted," Brahms writes in a major tonality to establish a hopeful feeling.

Another mood shift occurs when Brahms introduces the text from Psalm 126:5-6. He sets the tonality to linger around D-flat major and D-flat minor tonalities that vary depending on the measure. Brahms communicates the text of sowing in tears by having the altos, tenors, and basses singing a slow, descending line in D-flat minor while the sopranos sing an ascending line with hemiolas in D-flat major. In terms of text painting, the bottom three voice's descending lines in D-flat minor represent the tears descending the mourner's face, while the soprano's ascending line in D-flat major represents the possibility of joy approaching. The eventual cadence in D-flat major at measure 62 represents the people reaping joy. To conclude the first movement, Brahms brings back the beginning section of music along with the text from Matthew 5:4. The choir repeats the "... for they shall be comforted," text in a F-major tonality to give the listener a sense of comfort and relief. (Mandyczewski 3-20).

Movement two is titled, "Denn alles Fleisch ist wie Gras, which translates to, "For all flesh is grass." In this movement, Brahms utilizes four biblical texts. The first text he uses is from 1 Peter 1:24, "For all flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away." Because of the dark nature of the text, Brahms writes much of this section around a B-flat minor tonality. The altos, tenors, and basses introduce the text in unison and in a declamatory manner. Even when the full choir enters in homophony, Brahms does not give the listener time away from this dark mood. To transition to the second biblical text, Brahms cadences in B-flat major. This prepares the listener for a happier thought. The second text he uses is from James 5:7, "Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath

long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.” Brahms writes this section in G-flat major, slightly faster, and in a homophonic texture for the soprano, alto, and tenor. This section of the music features chromaticism and does not give the listener a true sense of tonality until the final cadence in G-flat major. A quick transition is made back into B-flat minor and with a Tempo I marking to bring back the beginning theme. The third text he uses is from 1 Peter 1:25, “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.” In the score, this section is only one and a half pages and is most likely used as a response to the previous text about receiving the early and latter rain. Brahms switches the tonality abruptly to B-flat major and gives the choir a subito forte marking to shift to a mood of praise. This section ends on an elided authentic cadence in B-flat major as the basses begin to sing the final text used in this movement. The final text that Brahms uses is from Isaiah 35:10, “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.” To begin this section, Brahms writes, “Allegro non troppo,” as the tempo marking. The beginning of this section flies by quickly and features an interesting collaboration between the choir and orchestra. To represent the songs of everlasting joy, Brahms writes fast triplets and tremolos for the strings, doubling of the voices for the winds, and the choir to be in polyphony. Using these compositional techniques, Brahms effectively paints a picture of people singing and rejoicing to the returning of the Lord (Mandyczewski 21-59). To conclude this movement, the orchestra holds a B-flat major chord that includes a dramatic crescendo and decrescendo. Simon Rattle, conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, does this tastefully by holding the note for about thirteen seconds, allowing for the orchestra to fully embrace the crescendo and decrescendo. (Rattle 2)

Movement three is titled, "Herr, lehre doch mich," which translates to, "Lord, make me to know my end." This movement introduces the baritone soloist, who also sings with the choir. For the first part of the movement, Brahms uses the text from Psalm 39:4-7, "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 has 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." Brahms begins this movement with the baritone soloist and orchestra in D minor. He composed the melody to effectively match the text by including many rests to represent a feeling of plea to the Lord, and by having the highest notes of the melody match the emphasis of the text. Likewise, he composes the melody to descend with a serious mood when the soloist reflects on himself wanting to know how frail he is. Frequently in this movement, the soloist will introduce a theme, and the choir will repeat the theme with the sopranos taking the soloist's melody. This first section ends with the soloist and choir sounding slightly agitated when singing, "And now, Lord, what wait I for?" To communicate the feeling of agitation, Brahms writes the melody with many intervallic leaps, frequent modulations, and marcato accents. He abruptly switches to a D major tonality in order to establish a more reflective mood and to effectively communicate the text of, "My hope is in thee." The concluding text that Brahms uses in this movement is from Wisdom of Solomon 3:1, "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them." To introduce this section, Brahms continues using the D major tonality and elements of polyphony to communicate the sense of safety for the souls in the hand of God (Mandyczewski 60-94).

Movement four is titled, “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen,” which translates to, “How amiable are thy tabernacles.” For this movement, Brahms uses the text from Psalm 84:1-2, 4, “How amiable are thy 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.” Musgrave says that the text for this psalm is, “... entirely a song of praise for the state of blessedness” (20). Brahms writes this movement in the key of E-flat major and for the first section and does not deviate away from E-flat major or its dominant, B-flat major. To communicate a feeling of wonder and awe, Brahms writes for the choir to sing in homophony with each line sounding melodious in their own way. The homophony is broken with the basses transitioning into the text of, “My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth...” This theme features chromaticism and a transition into a minor tonality. This compositional technique helps the listener to feel the longing and fainting of the soul. The mood abruptly shifts to a feeling of anticipation when the text of, “... my heart and flesh crieth out for the living God,” is introduced. Brahms writes a subito piano for the full texture, gives marcato accents to the choir, syncopation to the strings, and frequent modulations. In addition, Brahms writes for a slow, yet constant crescendo through this section to fuel the listener’s anticipation. The point of arrival occurs at measure 124, where Brahms uses the elements of a fugue to paint a picture of Heaven and the people rejoicing to God (Mandyczewski 95-113). Faux and Rayl write, “... the double fugato setting of the final line of the verse (“They are ever praising you”) supports the thesis laid out thus far. The shifting accents and hemiolas distort the concept of measured (earthly) time and offer a brief glimpse of eternal praise. The moment passes all too quickly, however, and only the internal longing for heaven remains” (24).

Movement five is titled, "Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit," which translates to, "And ye now therefore have sorrow." The first text that Brahms uses is from John 16:22, "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." The second text that Brahms uses is from Ecclesiasticus 51:27, "Ye see how for a little while I labor and toil, yet have I found much rest." The final text that Brahms uses is from Isaiah 66:13, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you..." Apart from the final four pages of the movement, Brahms writes for the soprano soloist to stay with the text from Ecclesiasticus while the choir continues to sing the text from Isaiah. Often, the soprano text that talks about labor and toil also features a lot of chromaticism that modulates to a different key at the end of each phrase. When the choir continues their part, they utilize the key that the soprano soloist cadences on. This process repeats three times before the soprano soloist goes back to the text from John. My hypothesis for this is that the soprano soloist represents a heavenly figure that is speaking to the people (the role that the choir would play in this interpretation). She is speaking to the people that while times are tough, Jesus will come, and the people will rejoice. The choir's responses to the soloist represent the awaiting of Jesus to take away their sorrows (Mandyczewski 114-126). Faux and Rayl made a hypothesis on the overall role of the soprano soloist and her connection to movement three. They hypothesized that, "When viewed as the voice of Jesus rather than a mother, the soprano creates a connection with the baritone soloist in the third movement. The baritone sings the words of David, an earthly voice, about the inevitability of death. His question about life and death is answered in this movement by the heavenly voice of Jesus offering the promise of a joyful reunion" (26).

Movement six is titled, "Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt," which translates to, "For here have we no continuing city." In this movement, Brahms uses three biblical texts. The

first text is from Hebrews 13:14, “For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.” This first section begins in C minor with pizzicato strings and accented text from the choir. The choir’s repetition of the text gives off a feeling of uncertainty and the chordal structure lends to an eerie mood. The baritone soloist transitions to the second text from 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52, 54, 55, “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 all 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?” This section begins with a key change to F# minor, the baritone soloist singing about the hope of change, and the choir repeating his text for emphasis. The mood for this section begins to feel impatient as Brahms writes the baritone melody in a high register and with a lot of melodic motion. This feeling of impatience develops when Brahms writes for an *accelerando* in measure 68. The tonality switches to C minor and both choir and orchestra is at a *fortissimo* volume. The strings perform fast scales with tremolo bowing and the choir continues to sing about the dead rising and change coming. Brahms abruptly changes the texture from full orchestra and choir to only the baritone soloist with strings when the concept of “Death is swallowed up in victory,” is introduced. Now, the baritone soloist takes on a heavenly role by addressing the people (the choir) that their suffering of the past will be rewarded in the future. Faux and Rayl write, “Movement VI affirms the conviction that death has no power over the people of God” (26). “The final text used is from Revelation 4:11, “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.” The text for this section reflects a feeling of happiness and contentment with the power of the Lord. Brahms musically supports this change of mood by changing tonality

from C minor to C major and employing a fugue in the choir. Faux and Rayl write, "...the listener arrives at that place where Brahms has been leading from the inception of the piece. If there is any source of comfort to be derived from the *Requiem*, it is in the promise of this moment" (28). As mentioned earlier, movement six was originally the final movement of the *Requiem* and Brahms intended for this to be the true arrival of fulfillment with the work of the Lord. This sense of reaching fulfillment is also musically supported at the end of the movement. Brahms concludes this movement by employing a full texture at forte dynamic along with a perfect authentic cadence in C major (Mandyczewski 121-171).

Movement seven is titled, "Selig sind die Toten," which translates to, "Blessed are the dead." In this final movement, Brahms uses the text from Revelation 14:13, "... 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." Because of the nature of the text, Brahms composes this movement to be thin in texture. There are many instances where the choir is accompanied by only high winds, only strings, or a cappella. In addition, there are also instances where even the choir is not employing the use of all voices. This movement begins as a reflection to movement one, with the cellos and basses on a low F. However, Brahms immediately adds more strings and the sopranos in the higher part of their range in order to distinguish that the mood of this introduction will be different from movement one. Although the mood changes, Brahms does reuse a theme from measure nineteen in movement one and gives it to the altos in E-flat major at measure 132 in movement seven. As Brahms develops this theme, the listener eventually hears the melody one last time at measure 147 in the key of F major. To conclude the *German Requiem*, Brahms slowly fades the choir from the foreground, gives a pianissimo dynamic to the

winds and strings, and allows the harp to carry the ensemble to the final chord (Mandyczewski 172-192).

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