JOHANNES BRAHMS *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Op. 45 (*A German Requiem*)

**BORN:** May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany  
**DIED:** April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria  
**WORK COMPOSED:** 1865–68  
**WORLD PREMIERE:** Movements 1-3 on December 1, 1867, in Vienna, Johann Herbeck conducting; movements 1-4, 6-7 on April 10, 1868, in the Bremen Cathedral, Brahms conducting; complete work on February 18, 1869, in Leipzig, Carl Reinecke conducting the Gewandhaus Orchestra and Chorus  
**INSTRUMENTATION:** Two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, organ and strings. Duration: 75 minutes.

The Requiem Mass in the Roman Catholic liturgy is a mass in Latin for the dead. Instead of following the traditional liturgy, Brahms focuses on the living in his Requiem and assembled the text from the German Luther Bible.

Robert Schumann’s death in 1856 was a significant loss for Brahms. The Schumanns had welcomed him with open arms and in a very short time Brahms became one of the family. When Robert was confined in a mental sanatorium in February 1854 after his attempted suicide, Brahms visited him and acted as a go-between for Clara as she was not allowed to visit Robert until two days before his death (July 29, 1856). Brahms and Clara had a close, intensely emotional friendship until her death on May 20, 1896.

In February 1865 Brahms was devastated by the death of his mother and soon after he began work on the *German Requiem*. By the end of the summer of 1866 he had completed six movements. His original concept was for six movements and in the final version they are 1-4 and 6-7. After the tumultuous applause the work received on Good Friday 1868 in Bremen, Brahms added another movement, which became the fifth movement.

After he added the fifth movement the work centers around the fourth movement, *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen* (*How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place*). The first and last movements both begin with *Selig sind* (*Blessed are*) from the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount in the first movement and from the Book of Revelation in the seventh. These two movements also share musical elements, most notable in their endings. The second and sixth movements are dramatic: the former about the transient nature of life and the latter about the resurrection of the dead. The third and fifth movements both begin with a solo voice: the baritone requests *Herr, lehre doch mich* (*Lord, teach me*) and this theme is repeated several times by the chorus. The soprano and chorus sing a different text in the fifth. The soloists are part of the structure of the movements and, differing from Baroque oratorios, do not sing any arias. With the exception of the fourth and seventh, the other movements connect different Bible verses that lead from suffering and mourning to consolation. The first word heard in the work, *Selig* (*Blessed*), is also the last word.

The resulting structure of the Requiem is balance and unity; not only in terms of musical elements, but extra-musical elements as well. As the German composer and critic Walter Niemann (1876–1953) wrote, “The first half – the first through the third movements – is devoted almost entirely to earthly suffering, lamentation and mourning over the transitoriness and nothingness of human life, rather than to the consolation and the everlasting bliss of the redeemed. In the second half – the fourth through the seventh movements – mourning is gradually transformed, passing through the stages of pious faith, consolation, and joy in the living God, to celestial bliss and triumphant resurrection.”
The Requiem is one of the most beloved works in Brahms’ extensive and varied repertoire. Without question it is a compositional masterpiece, but its popularity may also be attributed to the fact that Brahms avoided an overly religious statement. Instead, his message is a Requiem for the people – something to which all humans can relate.

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