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Sunday Afternoon Classics

Brahms Requiem

Sunday 21 October 2018 2.30pm

Sponsored by Rushworth Foundation

PAUL HINDEMITH (1895-1963) **Overture, Cupid and Psyche**

In his twenties, the German composer Paul Hindemith started to discover the musical style that would make his name. It was tight, brittle, eruptive, rhythmically driven, sometimes acerbic and bore more than a passing reference to the music of times past: the bustling textures and instrumental weave of Baroque music (Handel and Bach) and the elegance and order of the Classical period (Haydn and Mozart).

Its lucidity made Hindemith's music particularly suitable for dance, and it was on a visit to the Villa Farnesina in Rome that the composer saw Raphael's frescoes on the story of Cupid and Psyche and decided to write a ballet on the theme. He got no further than the Overture, perhaps intentionally so; Hindemith was falling out of love with dance and knew that the Overture was the one bit that wouldn't need to be choreographed.

The story of Cupid and Psyche is one of beautiful attraction, love lost and love regained. There is no narrative element to Hindemith's neo-classical fast-slow-fast Overture. Rather, he depicts the beauty of Psyche while the luminosity of Raphael's frescoes shines through the score's transparency and detail. Some have heard a tinge of disillusionment and regret in the piece's slow central section; the work was written in 1942, in the depths of the Second World War, while the exiled composer lectured at Yale University.

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791) **Exsultate, jubilate, K165**

Aria: allegro / fast

Recitative –

Aria: andante – / at a walking pace –

Aria: vivace / lively

Mozart came from a family with close ties to the church and, like many composers of his time, wrote a considerable amount of sacred music, usually to order. His motet *Exsultate, jubilate* was written in early 1773 in Milan, where the 17-year-old composer had gone to oversee a production of his new opera *Lucio Silla*. One of the lead singers in the opera was the Roman castrato Venanzio Rauzzini (1746-1810) for whom *Exsultate, jubilate* was specially written. In our more humane times, however, the motet is usually performed by a soprano.

The work is effectively a mini-concerto for voice and orchestra. Apart from the short recitative that precedes its middle movement, it corresponds to the three-movement (fast – slow – fast) concerto model. Furthermore, despite its relative brevity, the work matches any Mozart concerto in terms of both its brilliance and tenderness. Throughout the work, and particularly in its ecstatic ‘Alleluja’ finale, religious piety meets operatic flamboyance to striking effect.

Anthony Bateman © 2018

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

A German Requiem, Op.45

1. *Selig sind, die da Leid tragen / Blessed are they that mourn*
2. *Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras / Behold, all flesh is as the grass*
3. *Herr, lehre doch mich / Lord, make me to know mine end*
4. *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen / How lovely is Thy dwelling place*
5. *Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit / Ye now are sorrowful*
6. *Denn wir haben hie / Here on earth*
7. *Selig sind die Toten / Blessed are the dead*

Why A *German Requiem*? The obvious answer is that, unlike any other familiar 19th-century work that calls itself ‘Requiem’, Brahms employs not the standard Latin liturgical text but a compilation from the German Bible. But the title can still cause perplexity. Brahms did become increasingly nationalistic in later years, especially after the unification of the German lands in 1871, but even then he seems to have doubts about the wisdom of his choice of wording, as he revealed in a reply to a letter from the cathedral organist Karl Martin Reinthaler. Reinthaler had been anxious to defend Brahms against charges that his Requiem was in some significant way irreligious – it had been pointedly noted that at no stage in the work do the words ‘Jesus’ or ‘Christ’ appear. Brahms’s response is guarded, but still revealing:

“As regards the title I will confess that I should gladly have left out ‘German’ and substituted ‘Human’. Also that I knowingly and intentionally dispensed with passages such as St John 3:16 (‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’). On the other hand I have no doubt included much because I am a musician, because I required it, because I can neither argue away nor strike out a ‘henceforth’ from my venerable extracts. But I had better stop before I say too much.”

One can understand why Brahms might have felt that he’d landed himself with the wrong title, particularly in years when certain forms of German nationalism were becoming increasingly strident. All the same, there was definitely an element of cultural pride behind his original choice. The Protestant Reformation had begun in Germany, and it was on German soil that the political might of the Catholic Church had first been successfully challenged. Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible – the source of Brahms’s text – had at once helped define the still developing German language and marked the beginning of a process by which scripture ceased to be the property of an educated elite and was opened out to the masses.

The great Protestant church compositions of Schütz, Bach and Handel – which left their mark on the *German Requiem* – had continued this process of democratising the mysteries of faith. Works like Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* and Handel’s *Messiah* had also brought a new stress on the humanity of Christ – a real, suffering human being rather than a mystical symbol. This was fertile ground for the emergence of a more humanistic kind of belief. Surely that is what Brahms meant when he suggested ‘A Human Requiem’ as an alternative title. The value of religious tradition would be acknowledged, especially its power to console in the face of death, but it was to be kept as non-dogmatic as possible. Human mortality, its grief and resolution were to be the object of contemplation, not a specific Deity.

Brahms had good reason to be reflecting on mortality and grief in 1865, the year he began work on the *German Requiem*. In January his mother suffered a stroke. Brahms hurried to her bedside, but he was too late. The experience was devastating. A friend, calling on him soon afterwards, found Brahms practising Bach at the piano with tears streaming down his face. Playing was one way of working through painful emotion; composing was clearly another. Brahms's feelings in the wake of his mother's death may well have spilled over in the powerfully elegiac slow movement of the Horn Trio, Op.40, composed in the summer of 1865. And by April that year, Brahms had sent two movements of the *Requiem* to his confidante Clara Schumann, virtuoso pianist and widow of the composer Robert Schumann. "I am hoping to produce a sort of whole out of the thing", he told her, "and trust I shall retain enough courage and zest to carry it through".

But another loss may have left its mark on the *German Requiem*. The second movement, the funeral march-like *Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras* (Behold, all flesh is as the grass), apparently derives its material from the 'slow Scherzo' Brahms had included in his abandoned Symphony of 1854-55 – later revised as the First Piano Concerto. Those were the years in which Brahms's mentor and champion Robert Schumann had suffered his catastrophic final breakdown. After Schumann died in a mental asylum in 1856 Brahms confided to Clara that the slow movement of the new Piano Concerto was to be a 'Requiem for Schumann'. So in the *Denn alles Fleisch* funeral march the *German Requiem* reworks material associated in Brahms's mind with another dreadful bereavement.

At the beginning of *Denn alles Fleisch* the chorus intones a chorale tune from Bach's Cantata No.27, *Wer weiss wie nahe mir mein Ende* (Who knows how near my end shall be). Echoes of that chorale can be heard in themes from other movements of the *German Requiem*; in fact Brahms told a friend that "the whole work was, essentially, founded on the chorale". These connections are of more than technical significance: they steer us away from the conclusion that the work is purely a requiem for Brahms's mother. In this case, part of the creative process involved the objectifying of private feelings: grief as a universal aspect of the human condition – or as Brahms put it, a 'Human' requiem.

A quick glance at the text of *A German Requiem* will show how different it is from that of the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead. There are no heartrending pleas for mercy, no terrifying depictions of the Last Judgement or glimpses of Hell. Musically there could hardly be a greater contrast between this and the grand operatic drama of Verdi's *Requiem*; the direct expressions of dread and anguish in Mozart's *Requiem* are likewise avoided. Instead there is, in the words of the German philosopher Ernst Bloch "a precious depth that avoids apotheoses." Something of that 'precious depth' can be felt in the opening movement (*Selig sind, die da Leid tragen*): a restrained, dignified hymn to the process of mourning – painful enough in itself, but holding out hope of recovery from loss.

The grim funeral march *Denn alles Fleisch* follows; but this too offers hope: winter turns to spring, the seed endures and grows again. There must be reckoning with one's own mortality, hence the prayer at the beginning of the third movement, *Herr, lehre doch mich, dass ein Ende mit mir haben muss*: (Lord, make me to know mine end). But the question *Herr, wes soll ich mich trösten?* – 'Now, Lord, what do I wait for?' – is answered by a majestic Bachian fugue for chorus and full orchestra, anchored throughout to a sustained bass D, symbol of the secure grasp of God's hand.

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen is a vision of the blissful life of the departed portrayed in a kind of serene waltz. This is the heart of the *German Requiem*. In a sense the whole structure of the work turns upon it; one could see it as the cornerstone of a huge arch. From now on the progress is broadly one of return – to the image of blessedness, and to the restrained warmth of the music that enshrined it. The fifth movement (*Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit*) does allow us a passing glimpse of something personal in its closing moments. As the chorus finally intones the words *wie einen seine Mutter tröstet* (as one whom his own mother comforteth) the soprano soloist dwells with quiet pathos on the words *aber ich will euch wieder sehen* – 'but ye shall again behold me'.

But then comes the most dramatic movement of all: *Denn wir haben hie*, its stormy defiance of death turning suddenly into another magnificent fugue (echoes of Bach and Handel, and also Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*). The last movement brings a return to the key of the first movement (F major), with echoes of its thematic material. Now it is the dead themselves, rather than those who mourn them, who are celebrated – as in the final 'In paradisum' prayer of the Latin Mass for the Dead. The chorus's final utterance is a repetition of the word we heard at the start of the *German Requiem*: *Selig* – 'Blessed'. The great arch is complete.