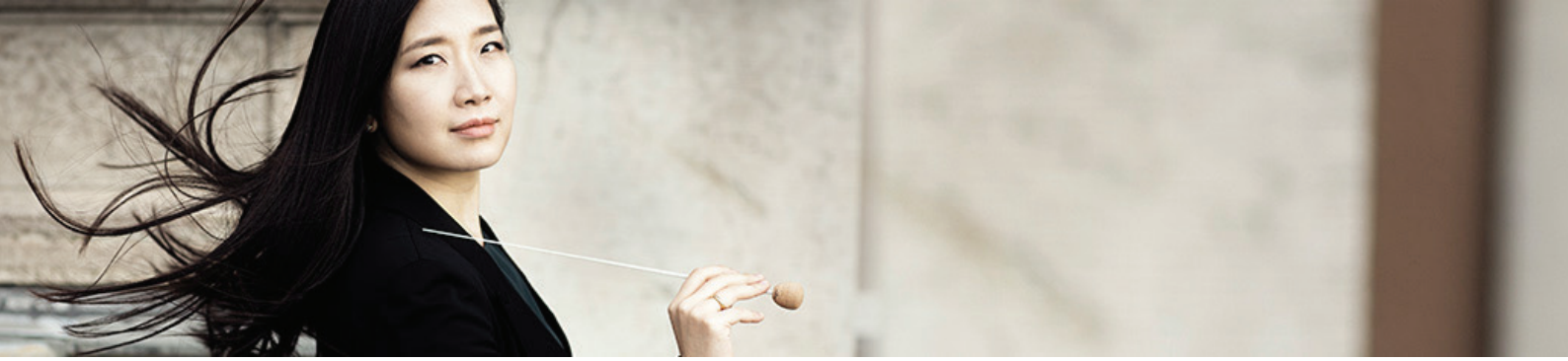

German Requiem

Choosing selections from Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, Brahms wrote his *German Requiem* more with an eye to consoling the living than to commemorating the dead. It stands as an iconic work of the choral/orchestral repertoire. On the first half of tonight's concert, we'll hear a flute concerto by Brahms's colleague and friend, Carl Reinecke.

CARL REINECKE

Born 23 June 1824; Hamburg, Germany
Died 10 March 1910; Leipzig, Germany

Concerto for Flute and Orchestra in D major, Opus 283

Composed: 1908
First performance: 15 March 1909; Leipzig, Germany
Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, percussion (triangle), strings
Approximate duration: 22 minutes

Carl Reinecke was a German composer, teacher, administrator, conductor, and keyboard virtuoso. His playing was admired by two of the greatest pianists of the 19th century, Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann. He taught at the Leipzig Conservatory — where Edvard Grieg, Arthur Sullivan, and Cosima Liszt numbered among his composition students — later becoming its director. As conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Reinecke conducted the premiere of the full seven-movement version of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*.

His D major flute concerto was written 1908. By that time, his compositional style was quite outdated; it was old-fashioned and rooted in the harmonic language of Mendelssohn and Schumann, even as Debussy, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky were writing new music. Nevertheless, it is a pleasing, tuneful work, relished by flutists everywhere.

The concerto opens with a four-bar introduction, as the flute plays over soft woodwind chords. The principal theme is sounded by the clarinet and violas, then extended by the clarinet and violins before the soloist's entry. The soloist expounds on the main theme with facile coloratura before passing to the eloquent second subject. The Allegro molto moderato is set in sonata form, with skillful development of its melodies,

The second movement, *Lento e mesto* (slow and sad), is a three-part form (A-B-A) in B minor. It commences with an ominous ostinato figure from the cellos, basses, and timpani; the soloist is instructed to play *con dolore* (with sorrow). The brief middle section is more tranquil and ventures into D major. Following a return to the movement's main theme, there's a B major coda that combines both the ominous ostinato and the pastoral section. The Finale begins in E minor as plucked strings accompany the clarinet's theme, and by the time the soloist enters to elaborate on the same notes, we're in the home key of D major. In what follows, there's ample room for virtuoso display, with contrasting melodic material, continuous escalation of energy, and a "Mendelssohnian deployment of orchestral forces." (Keith Anderson)

Recommended recording: Aurèle Nicolet; Kurt Masur, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Philips)

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born 7 May 1833; Hamburg, Germany Died 3 April 1897; Vienna, Austria

Ein deutsches Requiem, Op. 45 [A German Requiem]

Composed: 1857-68
First performance: 18 February 1869; Leipzig, Germany
Last MSO performance: October 2014; Robert Spano, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, 2 harps, organ, strings
Approximate duration: 68 minutes

Years before tackling his First Symphony, Johannes Brahms composed *Ein deutsches Requiem* as a memorial both to his mother and to his beloved mentor, Robert Schumann. It is his greatest choral work, and the most extensive score in the whole of his output. He was occupied with its composition for over a decade, and various movements were premiered along the way. By the time the seven-movement work had its first performance, Brahms had reached the ripe old age of 35.

Brahms would not have considered himself a religious man in the conventional sense of the word, but in the broad-minded sense, we wouldn't be too far off the mark to call him a Christian. He read from the Scriptures every day, using the children's Bible given to him in 1833, the one he used to compile texts for his sacred choral works and for the valedictory *Four Serious Songs*, Op. 121 (1896). His personal religious viewpoint is made clear by the fact that he eschewed the traditional Latin text of the Roman Catholic requiem — with its depictions of judgment and punishment — turning instead to Martin Luther's translation of *Die Bibel*. He chose verses that speak of hope and comfort: "As regards the text, I must confess that I should very much like to leave out the 'German' and simply put in 'Human'..." It's interesting, too, that Christ's name is nowhere mentioned. Though the work is firmly rooted in North German Lutheranism, narrow dogma is avoided; the Requiem is addressed to all who believe, regardless of their creed.

Brahms's Op. 45 is cast in seven movements, which allows for a felicitous symmetry: The first and last movements correspond to each other, as do the second and sixth, and the third and fifth. At the center is the sublime fourth movement, "which is, as it were, the gentle trio of the work." (Karl Geiringer)

1. **Selig sind, die da Leid tragen**. Brahms sets a somber mood by eliminating the violins — a technique he used in the Serenade No. 2, Op. 16 — and dividing the violas and cellos. At the beginning, the chorus intones an unaccompanied phrase: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." Flute and harp add occasional bits of sunlight to the generally dark-hued orchestration. The music moves toward a restrained but cathartic climax, then the sound disappears like clouds dispersed by the wind.

2. **Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras**. The music of the second movement began its life much earlier, as a two-piano sonata Brahms repurposes here. Though its tempo head reads "Slow, moderate march," the music is in 3/4 — more like a slow dance of death in B-flat minor. The violins and violas are divided, and harp and timpani lend a distinctive color. Nearly 200 measures in, Brahms startles us with the *forte* declaration "But the word of the Lord endures forever," ushering in a powerful section with renewed intensity. Trumpets and horns assist in proclaiming "The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads," but all of a sudden the final pages become tranquil, and the movement ends in a serene B-flat major.

3. **Herr, lehre doch mich**. "Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days," sings the baritone soloist, and the chorus repeats after him. Later, there's an urgent plea, "Now, Lord, how shall I find comfort?" As the pace slows, the winds intone soft, ambivalent chords before the choral voices blossom, moving from lowest to highest, with the words "I hope in Thee." Then comes a triumphant fugue, firmly rooted by an unshakable pedal D in the low instruments and timpani: "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment can touch them."

4. **Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen**. The gently lyrical fourth movement, "the finest choral writing of the century" (R.M. Longyear), stands at the center of the work. For it, Brahms used an orchestration that is clearly more restrained than other portions of the *Requiem*, unfurling a sound picture of rapturous beauty: "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!"

5. **Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit**. Surely a tribute to his beloved mother, the fifth movement is the last one Brahms composed, after having conducted six movements in Bremen on 10 April 1868. Its atmosphere is hushed and sustained. The soprano soloist sings words of solace from the books of John and Sirach, and the chorus repeats a single line of text from Isaiah: "I will comfort you as one whom a mother comforts."

6. **Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt**. Of the *Requiem's* seven movements, the sixth is the most overtly dramatic. The baritone soloist interrupts the choir's opening stanzas with words from St. Paul, which they repeat in hushed tones. At "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised," Brahms employs fiery brass chords, surging strings, timpani rolls, and a deluge of choral sound. As the music becomes increasingly urgent, the chorus repeatedly wags its finger in the face of the Grim Reaper, demanding to know, "Where is thy victory?" ("Wo, wo, wo, wo ist dein Seig?") The altos then lead off with a victorious new theme, one that commences "a mighty double fugue of Handelian strength and glory" (Geiringer) in both the chorus and orchestra: "Lord, Thou art worthy to receive glory and honor and power."

7. **Selig sind die Toten**. With his choice of text ("Blessed are the dead"), Brahms clearly links the final movement with the opening movement ("Blessed are they that mourn"). The sopranos sing a soaring melody in F major that is immediately taken up by the basses, then slowly enveloped by the entire chorus. Following a tender interlude in A major ("They rest from their labors"), the tenors sing the theme that began the movement, and soon we hear music that echoes the very beginning of the *Requiem*. We're back in F major and, as all voices settle on a unison F, the harp calmly strums triplet arpeggios that evoke "a dying heartbeat." (Geiringer)

Recommended recording: Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau; Otto Klemperer, Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus (EMI)