

## Karl Richter

The genesis of Brahms's *German Requiem* was complex, extending, as it did, over a period of several years. The composer first conceived the work in 1855 on hearing of Schumann's descent into madness. He sketched out an outline of the work at this time and a number of themes were even set down on paper, only for them to find their way into the *First Piano Concerto*. In the event, it was not until 1869 that the German Requiem was first heard in its final form in Leipzig. In the meantime, Brahms had continued to work away at it, and there seems little doubt that it was the death of his mother in 1865 that provided the definitive impetus. The first three movements were performed in Vienna on 1 December 1867, and on Good Friday (10 April) 1868 a six-movement version was heard in Bremen Cathedral, with Handel's "I know that my Redeemer liveth" from his *Messiah* interpolated into the performance, the composer having been told that the work lacked any sense of divine consolation. In turn, this led him to write an extra movement for soprano and chorus, which was placed in fifth position. *The German Requiem* as we know it today was performed in Leipzig on 18 February 1869 and proved a triumphant success. Within ten years more than one hundred performances had taken place the length and breadth of Europe, an exceptional number by the standards of the time.

In fact, Brahms had previously written no large-scale orchestral work with the single exception of his *First Piano Concerto*. In spite of this, his mastery is undeniable.

The varied colours – often sombre and tender – that he brings to his vast symphonic forces, the spectacular impact of the tutti passages and the skilful use of the basses and woodwinds lend weight to Schumann's prophecy, made soon after the two men had first met, namely, that the younger composer would develop a magnificent command of orchestral and choral writing. All those who knew the composer and thought like Schumann were unsurprised by the success of the *German Requiem*. After all, Brahms had spent a number of years working as a chorus master, first at the court of Lippe-Detmold and then at the head of the Vienna Singakademie. By 1868 he had already written a number of choral works. Technically speaking, he is at his most impressive in the vocal writing of his *German Requiem*.

The listener should not expect to find in this work the sound and fury of Berlioz or even the sort of effects habitually associated with settings of the *Mass for the Dead*. Brahms did not set the words of the votive Mass in the Roman Catholic rite but, instead, took as his model such famous precedents as Schütz's *Musicalische Exequien* and Bach's *Actus tragicus*, combining a series of texts from Luther's German Bible to produce a sort of mural illustrative of human suffering, taking in the composer's own obsession with death and our difficult journey through life, but without trying to offer his fellow human beings the promise of some otherworldly paradise. Rather, he argued, we should find our own consolation within ourselves. As a result, the work is characterized by a profound pessimism – the sort of emotion that the composer himself must have known: after all, he admitted that he had never known "inner laughter". As such, the work ends on a note of essentially humanist hope, hence the composer's use of the indefinite article in its title: A German Requiem.

The work's seven movements devolve in essence on the chorus, the baritone soloist appearing only twice, the soprano soloist only once. In the opening movement the violins are silent, resulting in a mood of resignation that is rarely lifted and that permeates the whole of the score. The second movement is a kind of funeral march built around an impressive crescendo finally scored for full orchestra and allowing the first rays of hope to shine through.

In the third movement the baritone soloist engages in a mournful dialogue with the chorus (“*Lord, make me to know mine end*”). The chorus then launches into a powerful fugue. The fourth and fifth movements establish a note of greater serenity and an almost pastoral atmosphere. As we have already observed, the fifth movement was added at the last moment and includes a setting for soprano soloist of a particularly beautiful passage from the Gospel according to Saint John. This is the only mention of the Mother of God in the whole of the work. The sixth movement begins with a calm and poetic passage for the baritone soloist. This is not only the longest movement in the work, it is also the most dramatic, with its terrifying account of the Apocalypse, the only passage in the *Requiem* that recalls the violence of the *Dies irae*. It, too, ends with a grandiose fugue. To conclude the work, Brahms returns to the resigned mood of the opening movement, while adding a note of greater consolation (“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth”).

In 1966 Karl Richter joined forces with the RTF Chorus and Orchestra for a series of performances of the *German Requiem* in France, most notably in Angers and Paris, where the concert was recorded by French

television. At that date the work was still relatively unknown in France. Karl Richter, conversely, was well known for his Bach recordings – not only a celebrated series of cantatas but also the *Orchestral Suites* and *Brandenburg Concertos*. It was, therefore, in an unusual repertory that French audiences of the time heard this trained organist and founder and principal conductor of the Munich Bach Orchestra, and yet his interpretation of the work demonstrated an undeniable empathy with a monumental choral composition that he saw as part of the great German tradition of sacred music. His soloists were the soprano Evelyn Lear, who was best known at the time for her bold assumptions of the role of Lulu, and her husband, the great Wagnerian baritone Thomas Stewart. Together, these forces provide us with a grandiose evocation of man's incomprehension in the face of death and of the consoling virtues of faith, a faith that Brahms himself felt in spite of the fact that he belonged to no established Church and had no time for religious conformity.

Born in Berlin at the dawn of the century and belonging, therefore, to the generation before that of Karl Richter, Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt (1900–73) was one of those German conductors who, solid and versatile, may have lacked the ultimate in genius but knew how to conduct everything from Mozart to modern music, everything from symphonies to operas, while at the same time proving a remarkable orchestral trainer. The bonus track on the present DVD allows us to watch him at work with the Orchestre National de l'ORTF in Paris in 1965. The concert was televised by the main French television channel of the day. The profoundly Romantic lyricism that he brings to Siegfried's Rhine Journey and to the *Prelude*

and *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde* demonstrate his ability to inspire an orchestra that had little experience of Wagner's spell-binding music and to produce a voluptuous interpretation far removed from the beaten track. The result is a picture of a German conductor very different from that of the purer Classicism of Karl Richter.

Jean-Luc Macia – January 2007

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