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Montgomery Philharmonic 2018 - 2019 Our 13th Season : They Changed The World

May 19, 2019, 4 PM – Brahms, the Humanist (with the Central Maryland Chorale)

About Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms started his musical studies as a violinist and cellist, first studying with his father, Johannes Jakob Brahms. He went on to study piano at age 7 with Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel, but Cossel complained that Brahms was never much of a pianist because he could never stop composing. At the age of 10, Brahms made his debut in a private concert of Beethoven's – *Quintet for Piano and Winds*, Opus 16, and a piano quartet by Mozart (which one is unknown because the program is lost). After a while, Brahms went to Cossel's teacher, Eduard Marxen (1806–1887), to study both piano and composition. Marxen was a personal friend of both Beethoven's and Schubert's, so he made sure that Brahms' compositions were grounded in the traditions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. In 1949, Brahms made his solo piano and composition debut playing Beethoven's *Wallenstein Sonata* and his own composition, a waltz fantasia. This concert garnered him favorable reviews as both a pianist and a composer in the local newspaper, and launched his early career.

In 1850, he traveled as a pianist with Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi. Reményi introduced Brahms to the czardas, which led Brahms to compose two sets of Hungarian Dances, first for piano and later orchestrated. While on one of their tours, Reményi introduced Brahms to Joseph Joachim. This meeting began a friendship of more than 50 years that was interrupted briefly when Brahms took the side of Joachim's wife in their divorce. After meeting Joachim, Reményi took Brahms to Weimar where he met Liszt, Peter Cornelius, and Joachim Raff. Liszt asked to see one of Brahms' compositions, so Liszt performed Brahms' Opus 4, *Scherzo*, at sight and then performed Liszt's *Sonata in B minor*. While Liszt was performing, Brahms fell asleep. This caused a big rift between Brahms and Reményi, so they parted. After Brahms and Reményi parted, Brahms decided to visit Düsseldorf to visit the Schumanns, with a letter of introduction from Joachim. The letter did the trick and all three became fast friends. After Robert Schumann's attempted suicide, he stayed close to Clara Schumann, handling her business affairs and getting her through her husband's passing.

Brahms' mature period of composition and performing began in 1862. He had hoped to be given the conductorship of the Hamburg Philharmonic but it was given to the baritone Julius Stockhausen instead. Later, when the position was offered to him, he turned it down because he wanted to devote all of his time to composing. In 1863, Brahms met Richard Wagner and played his *Handel Variations*, Opus 24. Wagner was cordial to Brahms, but it was Brahms who was taken by Wagner's music, not the other way around. Brahms' music was backward looking and Wagner was forging a new path musically, which Brahms could hear in Wagner's music. He helped Wagner prepare for his Vienna concerts and was given a manuscript of part of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, only to have it be demanded back in 1875.

In the 1870s, Brahms became acquainted with Johann Strauss II and their friends grew very close. Brahms admired Strauss' music, especially his waltzes, and encouraged him to publish with his publisher, Simrock. In his later years, he began to write music only for close personal friends. These later years produced song cycles, a clarinet trio, a clarinet quintet, and the two famous clarinet sonatas, along with works for organ and piano. Most of these works were written in Bad Ischl, where he spent his summers. The piano from this summer house made its way to Akron, Ohio, and remained in the home of pianist Margaret Baxtresser until her passing some 10 years ago. Brahms was diagnosed with cancer of the liver but still tried to attend concerts. In his final month, he managed to attend a concert of his *Symphony No. 4* conducted by Hans Richter and a premiere of Strauss' opera, *Die Göttin der Vernunft*.

- **Born:** May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany
- **Died:** April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria
- **Nationality:** German
- **Father:** Johann Jakob Brahms (1806–72), a string and wind player in Hamburg, Germany; eventually became a double bass player in the Hamburg Stadttheater and the Hamburg Philharmonic Society
- **Mother:** Johanna Henrika Christiane, née Nissen (1789–1865), a seamstress
- **Siblings:** a sister, Elisabeth (Elise), born in 1831 and a younger brother, Fritz Friedrich (Fritz), born in 1835
- **Compositions:** 2 overtures, 2 serenades for orchestra, 1 set of variations for orchestra, 3 Hungarian dances for orchestra, 4 symphonies, 4 concerti, 10 works for choir, soloist, and orchestra, 3 violin sonatas, 2 cello sonatas, 2 clarinet sonatas, 5 trios, 3 string quartets, 3 piano quartets, 6 quintets and sextets, 39 works for solo piano, 7 works for piano 4 hands, over 60 song cycles

A German Requiem, Opus 45 (1865–1868) – Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

History tells us that Johannes Brahms was inspired to write *A German Requiem* because of the death of his dear friend, Robert Schumann, and his mother, Johanna Henrika Christiane Brahms. His requiem turned out to be the most non-traditional requiem to date. Instead of setting the traditional Catholic, Latin text used by Mozart, Berlioz, and others, Brahms created a highly personal version using excerpts from the Lutheran Bible and Apocrypha, early Christian writings not included in the New Testament. This gives his requiem a uniquely Protestant character that reflects his Northern German upbringing.

The piece was premiered in Bremen, Germany, and even the conductor expressed concern that it did not include any reference to Jesus. Brahms' letter to the conductor explained: "On the other hand, however, I did accept many a thing because I am a musician, because I was making use of it, because I cannot challenge or strike out the text of my revered bards, not even a 'from henceforth.'" This reflects Brahms' deep beliefs in humanity, yet he continued to shelter any religious beliefs. This extremely private man was confirmed as a Lutheran and knew the Bible well, yet he claimed no religion and was very open to all the religions of the world.

The other important point about Brahms' *A German Requiem* was that it did not offer prayers for the souls of the dead; rather, it offered comfort to those left behind. This was at the center of the humanist nature of the piece. Brahms himself said that he would gladly call it "a human requiem," and the work's persistent tender, sympathetic humanism is apparent right from the very first line: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

The music is a study in unity and balance. The music that Brahms wrote is so very closely related to the text that the listener feels an unparalleled blending of these two aspects. The unity of structure is demonstrated in the way the movements relate to another. Each movement is balanced and related to another movement either by way of content or musical forces. Movements I and VII use some of the same material, often centering on the words "Selig sind," ("Blessed are those"); the first movement opens with these words and the last movement ends with them. Movement II reflects the funereal mood and Movement VI reflects the hope of the Resurrection. Movements III and V employ soloists—a baritone solo for III ("Lord let me know mine end") and a soprano solo for V ("Ye now have sorrow"), yet the choir blends with the soloists, and IV is the transitive movement that guides us from sadness and grief to comfort and acceptance.

The work as a whole is held together by two compositional devices that Brahms uses as building blocks for his requiem: The first, a three-note motive that begins with the soprano entrance on the words "Selig sind," is the main structural cell that Brahms uses to craft the entire requiem. He subjects this three-note cell to every type of permutation a composer can, and builds a masterpiece from a three-note motive consisting simply of a major third and a minor second.

The second device that permeates Brahms's requiem is a throwback to the chorales of J.S. Bach. It is no secret that Brahms had rediscovered the genius of Bach in his studies, but he takes his homage one step further by including an uncanny shape and style of a Bach chorale melody in the opening viola line of Movement I. Brahms then transposes this fragment to the minor key in the second movement's opening vocal line, again creating a unity between the movements, as well as the requiem as a whole.

[Text and English Translation –](#)

Instrumentation – piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, organ, violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello, double bass

Artifacts –

[Johannes Brahms official Website](#)

[A website that gives commentary about over 30 recordings of the piece](#)

[Manuscripts and letters in the collection at the Library of Congress](#)



Brahms: Ein deutsches Requiem (A German Requiem)

Berlin Philharmonic

Brahms: Ein deutsches Requiem

John Eliot Gardiner & Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique

Brahms: Ein Deutsches Requiem

Andreas Schmidt, Barbara Bonney, Rudolf Scholz & Walter Hagen-Groll

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Brahms: Ein Deutsches Requiem

Brahms: Ein Deutsches Requiem (German Requiem)

German Requiem in Full Score

YouTube.com Links –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9C8pEAIJZA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOoWUlyBn0Y>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJelOS-fjrY>