

## **Making Music Programme Notes Bank**

### **Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)**

#### **"Liebeslieder Waltzer" (Lovesong Waltzes), Op. 52**

Brahms was born in Hamburg and died in Vienna, a month before his 64th birthday. His father, a double bass player, taught him the elements of music, and he later became a pupil of Eduard Marxsen for piano and theory. As a teenager he played the piano in cafes and dance halls, at the same time as beginning his early compositions.

In 1853, Schumann heard some of Brahms's music, met the young composer and wrote an enthusiastic article about him. This review and Schumann's recommendations to publishers helped Brahms to become noticed. Over the next ten years he built his reputation, settling in Vienna in 1864. Among Brahms's chief compositions are four symphonies, two piano concertos, a violin concerto, and a wealth of chamber music, piano music, songs and choral compositions.

The 18 *Liebeslieder Waltzes* Op. 52 were published in 1869. They were premièred in Vienna the following year by Brahms and Clara Schumann, proving so popular that five years later Brahms published a second set of 14 songs under the title *Neue Liebeslieder* Op. 65. Both sets use the rather undistinguished verses of Georg Friedrich Daumer. By the end of the second set, the composer had clearly tired of the exercise, since he added a 15th number using a text by Goethe entitled "The muse has left me"!

Schubert is the model for these waltzes, and although Brahms does not achieve the light-footed gaiety of later exponents of the high Viennese waltz style, his dances have an unexpected zeal and geniality, producing an amazing variety of moods through key, rhythm and dynamic changes. Each number is, as might be expected, in 3/4 time and, since the chorus parts are described as optional, the piano accompaniment for four hands is of unusual importance.

With only a few exceptions the songs are each quite short and explore the entire range of the subject of love. There are simple stories, passionate outbursts, brooding melancholy and songs of deep devotion.

#### **Love-song Waltzes**

- 1 Tell me, maiden
- 2 Beating waves on rockbound shore
- 3 O ye maidens, ye enchain me
- 4 Would that I a maiden lonely
- 5 The young vines twining tendrils
- 6 A tiny bird that flew so high
- 7 How fair the May

- 8 When thine eyes with love alight
- 9 By Danube's water
- 10 O how soft the streamlet flows
- 11 No! I cannot bear the gossips
- 12 Locksmith, come and make me padlocks
- 13 O'er the sea the swallows fly
- 14 See how clear the moonbeams play
- 15 Nightingale
- 16 O love is a deep dark well
- 17 Do not wander out there in the fields, my love
- 18 The tree's high branch is trembling

Authors: Mansfield Choral Society

Date: March 1994

### **Gipsy Songs**

Just as the *Requiem* is probably Brahms's most profound work, so the set of eleven *Zigeunerlieder* (Gipsy songs) Op 103 is certainly one of his most lighthearted. The songs were composed in 1887 at Hofstetten near Thun in Switzerland, where at that time he regularly rented a villa for the summer months. Brahms claimed that he wrote them purely for fun. It cannot be doubted that they were of great commercial value, combining as they do the appeal of two of his most successfully marketed earlier works, the colourful Hungarian Dances and the tender Love Song Waltzes for voices and piano duet. Both as quartets and in the solo version of eight of them published soon afterwards they netted Brahms a small fortune. In Eric Sams' words 'the mood and music of boots and spurs that shine and jingle must have struck responsive chords in many a middle-aged fantasy-life'.

The influence of Brahms's early contact with gipsy music through working with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Remenyi showed itself in many of his major chamber and orchestral works as well as in the Hungarian Dances and these songs. The songs themselves are by turns dainty and passionate. The melodies are Brahms's own and convey the character of gipsy life through their irregular rhythms, frequent syncopation and, in the accompaniment, imitation of various gipsy instruments, especially the dulcimer or 'cembal' in Nos. 5, 6 and 9 and particularly No. 10. The words are Hungarian folksong texts translated into German by Hugo Conrat, a Viennese friend of the composer, and the English version captures well their capricious spirit.

Author: John Nightingale

Date: June 1991

### **"Ein Deutsches Requiem", Op. 45**

It is most likely that the idea for *Ein Deutsches Requiem* occurred to Brahms soon after the death of his great hero and mentor Robert Schumann in 1856. Brahms, a sensitive, introverted individual, was profoundly affected by this tragedy and seems to have started work on a D minor symphony that he later abandoned, recycling some of the music in other works. The slow movement of this aborted symphony, which itself seems to have been culled from an 1854 sketch of a sonata for two pianos, eventually became part of the second movement of the *Requiem*. By 1861, according to the historian Carl Geiringer, Brahms had mapped out four movements of the *Requiem*. But it was the devastating blow of his mother's death in February 1865 that impelled him to complete it.

By August 1867 the work had six movements and was, as far as Brahms was then concerned, complete. Its première was arranged for Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday (10 April) 1868. Prior to that, however, the first three movements received a disastrous performance in Vienna in December 1867. As it turned out, this in no way discouraged interest in the work, and the Bremen performance, conducted by Brahms himself in front of a packed cathedral, was a triumph. Indeed, it finally established him as a composer of substance. By 18 February 1869, when the *Requiem* was given in the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Brahms had added the lovely soprano solo with choral interpolations that now stands as the fifth movement.

The Leipzig performance was coolly received, but the enthusiasm with which the Bremen performance in 1868 had been greeted carried the day. In 1869 the *Requiem* was heard in a dozen other German towns as well as being given twice in Basel and Zürich. By 1872 it was receiving its debut performances in Utrecht and St Petersburg. The first public performance in London was not heard until 1873 and appears to have been a sad failure. Yet today the *Requiem* takes its place as one of the truly great choral masterworks.

As its title suggests, *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (*A German Requiem*) is not a traditional musical setting based on the Latin Mass for the Dead. Nor is it a Protestant service, even though the sources of its text are drawn from Luther's translation of the Bible and Apocrypha. In one sense, the work is not even Christian, since it makes no reference to the name Jesus Christ whatsoever. What Brahms has produced in this work, as he intended, is a Requiem to console the living. It might well be considered a direct appeal to God for comfort.

The work consists of seven movements. The first, based on one of the Beatitudes, is dark and restrained in mood. The accompaniment at first is kept in the lower strings of the orchestra. But the music of the middle section gives hope and a promise that those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.

The second movement contrasts the impermanence of humankind and the everlasting nature of God. Brahms uses texts from the Epistles of St Peter and St James and the Book of Isaiah. A slow D minor march, more like a sarabande,

together with its repetition, frames a lilting section describing the patience of God. Then the movement suddenly erupts into a joyous effusion, setting the declaration that "the redeemed of the Lord shall come again." The final hope that "joy everlasting shall be upon their heads" is set to some of Brahms's most ravishing music.

The third movement is a setting of Psalm 39 for baritone solo echoed by the chorus. It stresses the transience and frailty of humanity and appeals to the Almighty for help, even though to God man is as nothing. Yet once again Brahms sheds upon this dark picture the light of hope and consolation, and he does it in a magnificent fugue over a sustained D pedal point. In the unfortunate 1867 Vienna performance of the first three movements of the *Requiem*, this was intended to be the grand finale. Sadly one of the reasons why the performance was such a fiasco was that an overenthusiastic timpanist drowned out all the other musicians!

The fourth movement is "How lovely are Thy dwellings", the well-known setting of part of Psalm 84 so often heard as a choral item on its own. The smooth, beautifully lilting opening contrasts with the double fugato section symbolizing the eternal praise of God in heaven. The blend of comforting and restrained laudatory music is compelling.

The fifth movement is essentially for a soprano, with the choir commenting quietly on her solo. The text is taken from St John's gospel, from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, and from Apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus. The mood of this number is purely consolatory and contains some of Brahms's most beautiful music. It may perhaps be worth noting that the sentiments expressed by the choir, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you..." link us directly to one of the emotional sources of the *Requiem*'s composition, the love Brahms always had for his own mother. Since this was the last movement of the work to be composed (in 1868), it is often reckoned to be an afterthought. But such a deeply felt movement that touches the very heart of Brahms's personal feelings for one so dear to him can hardly be an afterthought. Perhaps for the Bremen performance he simply had not yet found the right medium in which to cast that devotion.

The sixth movement is Brahms's portrayal of the Day of Judgment, drawing on New Testament sources: Hebrews, Corinthians, and Revelation. The vision is prefaced by yet another reminder of the fleeting nature of human existence, this one embodied in a rather solemn chorus. The baritone soloist announces the sound of the last trump, and the chorus is plunged into the Last Judgment. This is no Verdian vision of terror, but again a vision full of hope. The setting of the words "Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?" is almost joyous in part. And just at the point where you think it must end, Brahms unleashes one of his grandest fugues, announced by the altos, emerging triumphantly from a long-held chord of C major: "Herr, du bist würdig" ("Lord, Thou art worthy") - a truly spectacular effect!

For the final movement Brahms draws all his material from Revelation. The mood is wholly comforting, using text that is also familiar in more traditional Requiems - "Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben" ("Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord"). A soaring tune, sung first by the sopranos, later by basses and tenors, drives this glorious movement forward. Eventually, the music subsides, and suddenly we find ourselves back at the beginning, reprising the opening theme, which had earlier been used for a beatitude. The sense of consolation prevails, as the *Requiem* draws to its hushed and tranquil conclusion.

Author: William Gould

Date: 1997

### **Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)**

#### **Magnificat in C (D.486)**

*Allegro maestoso*

*Andante*

*Allegro vivace*

It has been suggested - quite mistakenly - that on leaving the Imperial College in 1813 Schubert took up a menial teaching post in order to avoid conscription. In fact assistant teachers were not exempt from military service. It was Schubert's small stature and indifferent eyesight that prevented him from donning the Emperor's uniform and sheer necessity that forced him to teach - which he heartily detested and declared to be an intolerable barrier between him and his freedom to compose. But the notion that these two years of drudgery inhibited his creativity does not stand up to scrutiny. In fact 1815 was his *annus mirabilis* and no other year approached this for the sheer volume of work produced. The catalogue is incredible and includes the *Symphonies in B flat* and *D*, five operas (two left unfinished), a *Stabat Mater*, two masses, a string quartet, nearly one hundred and fifty songs (including *Erkönig*) and a host of lesser works.

In the midst of this torrent of musical energy is the *Magnificat in C* which is dated 15 September 1815. In structure it is divided into three sections. The first - for chorus and orchestra - has a chorale-like theme as its outer components which bracket a fugal-type setting of *quia respexit*. The second section *Deposuit potentes* for solo voices, woodwind and strings is notable for its lyrical writing for the soprano to which the other voices are subordinated. The final section - *Gloria patri* - is a *concertante* for the complete ensemble built around contrasting material - chorale-like, polyphonic and lyrical and is reminiscent of the *Dona nobis pacem* settings in the later masses of Haydn.

Authors: The Forest Choir

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