

EIN DEUTSCHES REQUIEM :

NOTES ON BRAHMS' SELECTION OF BIBLICAL TEXTS

B C LATEGAN

INTRODUCTION

The influence of Biblical motifs on all forms of art - be it of a literary, musical or graphic nature - is one of the most fascinating subjects to explore. There is hardly an artist of the Christian era whose work has not been influenced, positively or negatively, consciously or unconsciously, by some or other Biblical theme or symbol. Sadly enough, the field of art is at the same time one of the most neglected areas in the formal curricula of Biblical Studies at our universities. This situation exists despite the obvious advantages of including it in some of the courses offered. Firstly, the various art forms supply illustration material of stimulating and high educational value. Secondly, art offers a unique way to assess the impact of Biblical perspectives on reality and to study the hermeneutical process from a cultural angle. For example, the portrayal of the Jesus figure throughout the history of painting offers just as interesting material for the understanding of his significance as the so-called quest for the historical Jesus.

The few notes on Brahms' Requiem (Opus 45) offered here, originate from a performance of the work by the "Stellenbosse Koorvereniging" in August, 1978. The choirmaster, Peter van der Westhuysen, asked prof Reino Ottermann of the Stellenbosch Conservatoire to prepare a paper on the music of the Requiem, while I was invited to discuss his selection of Biblical texts - all to serve as prelude to the actual performance. Subsequently, the material was used as part of a third year course in Biblical Studies. The response was encouraging enough to offer it to a wider audience, in the hope that it would stimulate those in teaching situations, whether at university or school level, to experiment along similar - or different - lines. It would be interesting to hear from our readers and to learn from their experiences in this regard.

It must be stressed that these notes will only make sense if combined with a careful listening and re-listening to the actual music. Readers will find several excellent recordings readily available.

THE THEOLOGICAL ISSUE

Before moving to the actual text of the Requiem, it should be pointed out that Brahms' choice of Biblical passages has been the subject of considerable controversy amongst his interpreters. On the one hand, Robert Heinried (1949:21) claims that Brahms closely follows the intention of the biblical text. All in all he must be considered a skilful exegete, driven by a deep personal religiosity. On the other hand, someone like Rudolf Gerber (1949:182) holds that essential elements of the Christian faith are missing from the Requiem (e.g. the redemptive death of Christ) and that the choice of texts is clearly not motivated by a "christliche Impuls".

It is impossible to take sides in this controversy before a careful study of the text itself. At this stage, however, it should be realized that part of the problem is *what* exactly was considered in the time of Brahms and especially in the musical circles of Vienna, to be "genuinely" Christian and what not. It should also be remembered that Brahms grew up in a strict Lutheran home in the north of Germany. From his earliest youth onwards, he acquired an extensive and accurate knowledge of the Bible. As far as church music is concerned, Brahms comes from a completely different background and tradition than the predominant Roman Catholic Vienna, in which he eventually finds himself as composer. It is only to be expected that he would not adhere strictly to the traditional rules and concepts of Catholic music and liturgy - in contrast to his great friend Heinrich von Herzogenberg, who was so completely at home in the Roman Catholic liturgy and who closely followed its conventions in his compositions (cf Spitta 1907:43). But even more than this - Brahms skilfully transforms a traditional Roman Catholic form of art, the requiem, to become the vehicle of his own interpretation of the biblical text. It is not surprising that in this way deviations took place from what in the time of Brahms was considered to be specifically "Christian".

Even if we accept that Brahms uses the traditional requiem in an unconventional manner, this still does not answer the question whether he

presents us with a faithful interpretation of the Biblical message. Only an analysis of this selection and arrangement of texts can provide us with an answer.

Before doing so, a last remark about the version Brahmms uses. It is the current Luther translation of his day, including the apocrypha of the Old Testament. Twice Brahmms uses passages from these books - once from the Wisdom of Solomon and once from Ecclesiasticus. The English text used here is from the traditional King James version.

I

Mat 5:4

Selig sind, die da Leid tragen, denn sie sollen getröstet werden.

Ps 126:5, 6

Die mit Tränen säen, werden mit Freuden ernten. Sie gehen hin und weinen, und tragen edlen Samen, und kommen mit Freuden und bringen ihre Garben.

II

1 Petr 1:24

Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen wie des Grases Blumen. Das Gras ist verdorret und die Blume abgefallen.

Jak 5:7

So seid nun geduldig, lieben Brüder, bis auf die Zukunft des Herrn. Siehe ein Ackermann wartet auf die köstliche Frucht der Erde und ist geduldig darüber, bis er empfahe den Morgenregen und Abenregen.

1 Petr 1:25

Aber des Herrn Wort bleibet in Ewigkeit.

Jes 35:10

Die Erlöseten des Herrn werden wiederkommen, und gen Zion kommen mit Jauchzen; Freude, ewige Freude wird über ihrem Haupte sein, Freude und Wonne werden sie ergreifen, und Schmerz und Seufzen wird weg müssen.

III

Ps 39:5-8

Herr, lehre doch mich, dass ein Ende mit mir haben muss, und mein Leben ein Ziel hat, und ich davon muss. Siehe, meine Tage sind einer Handbreit vor dir, und mein Leben ist wie nichts vor dir. Ach, wie gar nichts sind alle Menschen, die doch so sicher leben. Sie gehen daher wie ein Schemen, und machen ihnen viel vergebliche Unruhe; sie sammeln und wissen nicht wer es krigen wird. Nun Herr, wes soll ich mich trösten? Ich hoffe auf dich.

Weisheit Salomos 3:1

Der Gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes Hand und keine Qual rühret sie an.

IV

Ps 84:2, 3 & 5

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen, Herr Zebaoth! Meine Seele verlanget und sehnet sich nach den Vorhöfen des Herrn; mein Leib und Seele freuen sich in dem lebendigen Gott. Wohl denen, die in deinem Hause wohnen, die loben dich immerdar!

V

Joh 16:22

Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit; aber ich will euch wieder sehen und euer Herz soll sich freuen, und eure Freude soll niemand von euch nehmen.

Jesus Sirach 51:35

Sehet mich an: ich habe eine kleine Zeit Mühe und Arbeit gehabt und habe grossen Trost funden.

Jes 66:13

Ich will euch trösten, wie einen seine Mutter tröstet.

VI

Hebr 13:14

Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt, sondern die zukünftige suchen wir.

1 Kor 15:51, 52

Siehe, ich sage euch ein Geheimnis. Wir werden nicht alle entschlafen, wir werden aber alle verwandelt werden; und dasselbige plötzlich in einem Augenblick zu der Zeit der letzten Posaune. Denn es wird die Posaune schallen und die Toten werden aufstehen unverweslich, und wir werden verwandelt werden.

1 Kor 15:54, 55

Dann wird erfüllet werden das Wort, das geschrieben steht: Der Tod ist verschlungen in den Sieg. Tod, wo ist dein Stachel? Hölle, wo ist dein Sieg?

Apok 4:11

Herr, du bist würdig zu nehmen Preis und Ehre und Kraft, denn du hast alle Dinge erschaffen, und durch deinen Willen haben sie das Wesen und sind geschaffen.

VII

Apok 14:13

Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herren sterben, von nun an. Ja, der Geist spricht, dass sie ruhen von ihrer Arbeit, denn ihre Werke folgen ihnen nach.

I

Matt 5:4

Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted.

Ps 126:5, 6

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth; bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

II

1 Pet 1:24

For all flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away.

James 5:7

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

1 Pet 1:25

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

Isaiah 35:10

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

III

Ps 39:4-7

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them. And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee.

Wisdom 3:1

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them.

IV

Ps 84:1, 2 & 4

How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee.

V

St John 16:22

And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

Ecclesiasticus 51:27

Behold with your eyes, how that I laboured but a little, and found for myself much rest.

Isaiah 66:13

As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.

VI

Hebr 13:14

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

1 Cor 15:51-2

Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

1 Cor 15:54-55

Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

Rev 4:11

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

VII

Rev 14:13

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.

ANALYSIS

When looking at the arrangement of the various movements, there appears at first sight to be a certain symmetry of composition. Both the first and last movements start with a beatitude. Both movement II and VI have the transitoriness of life as their introductory theme, while III and V stress the need of comfort for the bereaved. Our analysis of the various movements will have to confirm or disprove this first impression.

In a requiem, certain dominant themes can be expected and in evaluating Brahms' selection of texts, it might be useful to keep them in mind. Of these themes the following may be mentioned:

1. The sorrow of the bereaved calling for comfort and support.
2. The realisation of the transitoriness of life.
3. The Christian hope of the final triumph over death.
4. Reference to the youngest day as a day of judgement and of rejoicing.

FIRST MOVEMENT

1. *Matt 5:4*

When Brahms uses a quote from the Sermon on the Mount as the introductory text of his Requiem, this has important implications for the tone and the understanding of his work as a whole. In this beatitude:

Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted
all the important themes which are developed extensively in the rest of the Requiem, are already present. To give a few examples:

- a. The acknowledgement of the reality of grief and pain, also (or rather, especially) in the life of the believer.

b. The realisation that this grief is of a unique quality - not merely grief as such, but caused by the unchecked advancement of evil, by vice apparently gaining the upper hand over virtue. It is grief experienced by the defeats of God's cause, by the mockery the pious has to suffer at the hands of the godless.

c. The unexpected discovery that this grief in fact forms the basis of a beatitude: those who suffer now on behalf of God's cause, will also share in the final victory.

d. The combination of grief and consolation on the grounds of the ultimate victory mentioned in c, is a recurring theme.

By the specific choice of texts, the personal grief experienced at the loss of a beloved is placed against the wider background of the grief and pain suffered in the struggle for God's cause, for his kingdom. This wider context, which forms the constant presupposition of the Requiem, is an important clue to its understanding. For this reason, the criticism of Meinardus (cf Gerber 1949:185) fails to convince. According to Meinardus, Brahms is not concerned about the personal grief of individuals, but places instead the "Todesgeschick der gesamten Kreatur" in the centre of his composition. But that is exactly Brahms' aim: not to treat personal grief as an isolated experience, but to understand it against the background of the universal suffering for God's cause. Only by placing it in the context of God's saving acts, personal grief can be understood in its proper perspective.

2. *Ps 126:5-6*

The choice of this psalm in combination with *Matt 5:4* is very fitting. It forms part of a collection of so-called "songs of ascents", beginning with *Ps 120* and ending with *Ps 134*. The theme of these songs is closely related to *Matt 5:4* - the pilgrim experience, the memory of past sufferings and the hopeful anticipation of a better future.

Ps 126 celebrates the return out of captivity. It is remarkable how the Requiem combines Old Testament with New and how often Brahms returns to the exile experience. The joy of the return to Palestine and Jerusalem is depicted in v 1-3. But the harsh realities of restoring the land meant grief and tears. Therefore the longing that the Lord will change their plight like streams in the south. Just as the dry *wadis* of the Negev desert suddenly can change into raging torrents, so suddenly can the Lord alter the fate of his people.

In a very striking metaphor, the *tears* of the mourners become the *seed* of the harvest of joy. The symbol of the harvest plays an important part in the Requiem and here forms the link between the first and second movements.

SECOND MOVEMENT

3. *1 Peter 1:24*

The second movement is linked both to the first and the third and is a typical example of the interlacing structure of the Requiem. The harvest theme of the first is developed further, while at the same time, the third is anticipated by introducing the theme of the transience of man. Striking is the march rhythm of the opening section - is it meant to express the unstoppable march of time?

The metaphor of man fading away like the grass and its flower, is in fact a quote from *Is 40:6-8*. It comes from the Book of Comfort, at the start of the second main section of *Isaiah*. Israel is comforted with the announcement of the liberation of the Babilonian exile, of the return to Palestine and the restoration of Jerusalem. Thus we once again encounter the return-from-exile motif which later also occurs in this section.

4. *James 5:7*

1 Pet 1:24 and *25* are separated in a rather unusual fashion by inserting *James 5:7* between the two verses. Why this juxtaposition? There are two possible explanations:

Brahms uses *James 5:7*, in which the husbandman's patient waiting for the harvest is stressed, to develop a theme already introduced in the first movement.

A second explanation - which does not exclude the first - is that Brahms consciously heightens the contrast between the temporariness and insignificance of life of *v 24* and the permanence and durability of the Word.

5. *1 Peter 1:25*

Music and text combines to form the most dramatic and explosive moment of the entire work. Conductor, orchestra and choir are presented with a formidable challenge to interpret this transition to its full meaning. Here the gospel is heard in its purest and most powerful form. As if the barrier of grief, pessimism and transience no longer can withstand the rising pressure of the life-giving Word, it is swept away in an

explosion of power and a gushing stream of joyous victory. The dramatic pause created by the "*aber*" compresses the whole gospel in a nutshell.

6. *Is 35:10*

The choice of *Is 35:10* to express this rapturous joy, can hardly be bettered. In this chapter the future blessings of the believers are extolled. The emphasis with which "... *wird weg*" is repeated several times stresses the final obliteration of sorrow and anxiety.

THIRD MOVEMENT

7. *Ps 39:4-7*

In the third movement a completely new mood is created. The theme of temporariness is continued, but the atmosphere is one of acquiescence with overtones of philosophical reflection. The hesitant and searching tone of the baritone fits the mood extremely well. Although the origins of *Ps 39* is uncertain, it clearly has been written in a time of severe personal affliction. Some interpret the psalm as a dispute between God and author and understand v 5 as an expression of exasperation: "Lord, if you let me suffer like this, then at least let me know when my end comes, so that I may know how long I still have to endure it". However, the idea of a dispute is rendered unlikely by v 7, which ends on a note of resignation and hopeful expectation. The stress in this section is on the testing of the author, his knowledge of the frailty of life and his hopeful expectation of his Lord.

8. *Wisdom of Solomon 3:1*

In this movement we find one of the two quotations from the apocryphical books. This sentence from the *Wisdom of Solomon* is taken from a passage in which the insignificance of the deeds of the godless stand in contrast to the blessed influence of the life of the pious. The context is therefore closely related to that of *Ps 39*, but at the same time new elements are introduced: the righteous are safe in the hand of God and no longer troubled by grief.

FOURTH MOVEMENT

9. *Ps 84: 1, 2, 4*

As centre-piece of his Requiem, Brahms chooses one of the most beloved

psalms of the Christian church. Originally a "song of degrees" sung at the festive procession to the sanctuary, it was later often interpreted in the church as a song about the believer's own pilgrimage through life on the way to his eternal destiny.

A beautiful psalm, full of light and happiness, without any trace of the dark sounds of sorrow and grief. The victory motif from the end of the second movement is taken up again, but from the third movement also the certainty that the believers are safe in the hand of their Lord. In a certain sense, a climax is reached and very significant is the concept of blessedness in v. 4, which links this movement to both the first and the last. We shall return to this construction.

FIFTH MOVEMENT

10. *John 16:22*

As far as the selection of texts is concerned, this movement presents us with quite a few difficulties. It starts off with the promise of *John 16:22* that the sorrow of the disciples eventually will be transformed to joy. In doing so, the theme of the last part of the second movement is taken up again - sorrow and sighing fleeing before joy and gladness. But then follows a quotation from the apocryphal book, *Ecclesiasticus*, which really describes the acquisition of wisdom and contributes little to the development of the movement - unless as a rather superficial reference to the idea of comfort. This reference reminds one of a similar passage (6:19) from the same book. Remarkable enough, the latter also appears in a context of the sower and harvest metaphor - this time with reference to the acquisition of wisdom ("Like with the ploughman and the sower, wisdom must be cultivated, treated with patience, till it produces good fruit").

11. *Is 66:13*

This quotation is from a context in which the praises of the restored Jerusalem are sung - it reminds of *Ps 84* - and which contains the promise that sorrow will be transformed into joy. The main thrust of v 13, however, is God's promise that Israel will be comforted.

Although the fifth develops themes from earlier movements, it does not fit - as far as the text is concerned - very well into the work as a whole. There may even be indications of this being a later addition. However, as far as the music is concerned, the soprano balances the

baritone of the third movement very well.

SIXTH MOVEMENT

In this movement, the transition from the negative to the positive, from death as terminal point to death as the beginning of a new existence, is carried through.

12. *Hebr 13:14*

As introduction, the central theme of *Hebrews* - man as pilgrim on earth (cf the same thought in the pilgrim psalm of the first movement) - is used to characterize the believer as oriented towards the future.

13. *1 Cor 15:51, 52, 54, 55.*

Soon the transition is made to the theme of the imperishableness of the dead that will be raised on the last day. In the words of *1 Cor 15* the victory over death is proclaimed and with a quotation from *Hosea 13:14* the final annihilation of death is celebrated. One cannot fail to detect the gleeful way in which the question is asked: "*Death, where is thy sting?*".

A complete reversal has taken place, compared to the beginning of the Requiem: From the transitoriness of life to the imperishableness of the resurrected man, from the relentless finality of death to the complete destruction of its power.

14. *Rev 4:11*

Very fittingly Brahms chose the words of the doxology from *Rev 4:11* ("*Herr, du bist würdig zu nehmen Preis und Ehre und Kraft ...*") to conclude this movement.

SEVENTH MOVEMENT

15. *Rev 14:13*

In the seventh movement, the circle is completed. As the Requiem started off with a beatitude from *Matthew*, the first book of the New Testament, it is concluded likewise with a beatitude, this time from the last book, *Revelations*.

But, a change has also taken place - from a beatitude on those that mourn to a beatitude on those that depart in the Lord. The focus has shifted from the grief of the bereaved to the happiness of those in the presence of the Lord. The reality of this future renders the sorrow of the

present bearable and meaningful.

CONCLUSION

Judging by the *text* of the Requiem, to say nothing of the music itself, we come to the conclusion that Brahms has indeed presented us with a well conceived and carefully worked out structure. We have seen how the theme of a later movement is introduced already at an earlier stage, while on the other hand previously employed motifs are developed further in subsequent movements.

Apart from this linkage on a linear level, we also found ample evidence of a structure of a different nature - that of a remarkable symmetrical construction. The first and last movements are built around a beatitude. But also the second and sixth are interrelated: in both the return of Christ and the advent of the youngest day appear. In the second the finality of death is stressed, in the sixth the victory over death. In a similar way, the third and fifth movements reveal clear parallels. In the third the transitoriness of life is balanced by the hope in God and the assurance that the believer will not fall from his hand and will be tormented no longer. In the fifth these concepts return - the promise that the present sorrow will change to joy - a joy nobody will take away from the believer. (Cf also Gerber 1949:282 for a similar scheme).

The fourth movement therefore forms the centre of the Requiem. Remarkable enough, it is linked by a beatitude ("*Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house ...*") to both the first and last movements. Without a trace of grief or darkness, it rejoices in the blessedness of the believer in the house of the living God. The traditional requiem is turned upside down by Brahms - the funeral march becomes a song of praise, the dirge changes into a victory jubilation.

Perhaps we are now in a position to venture an answer to our initial question: What does the selection of texts reveal about the personal attitude of its creator? Nobody can enter into the mind and thoughts of another - we have only the text to interpret. But on this basis we can at least say that such a delicately constructed edifice and such a development of themes (despite some minor difficulties) reveals a remarkable knowledge of the Bible and a high degree of sensitivity and sympathy for the deepest truths of the Word.

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