

“Music and the Spoken Word”
Comments by Robert Shaw, 1997

That the world celebrates this year the 100th anniversary of the death of Johannes Brahms with uncountable performances of his German Requiem is testimony not only to the esteem in which his music is held by a large part of the Western World, but also to the very special affection in which his Requiem itself is held.

Though it was his longest work, and acknowledged as very pivotal to his growing renown, he himself was not really satisfied with the title of German Requiem, saying that it referred solely to the language in which it was written. He would now prefer, he said, a "human" Requiem, for he was writing in exploration of a universal human experience.

It should be reported also, that he appeared to find very little comfort in the ritual or dogma of his day. He deliberately abstained from the Latin tradition of centuries in favor of a text which he himself assembled from the Hebraic/Christian Scriptures in Martin Luther's translation.

Certain things are abundantly clear: first, that he knew these scriptures very well indeed: the text which he gathered to form the seven movements of his Requiem has some sixteen widely separate sources among the thousands of pages of the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha.

In the second place, it is clear that he was more concerned with comforting the hearts of those left to mourn, rather than with escorting the departed through the medieval horrors of Wrath and Judgement.

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of historical, scientific and intellectual enrichment of the Hebraic/ Christian tradition. Though the Latin rites for the dead are deeply embedded in the religious history of Western Civilization, there can be little doubt that Brahms uses his text to welcome the consideration of death as a relevant and illuminating aspect of life itself.

Lord, help me to understand that my life on earth must have an end;
that I must depart.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall have comfort.
Yea, I will comfort you as one whom his own mother comforts.

And finally, of course, the text with which he chose to conclude,

Blessed are they who die in the Lord, for their works do follow after
them.