Ein deutsches Requiem is a watershed not only in Johannes Brahms’s development as a composer but also in the evolution of the Requiem as a musical form by transforming the Roman Catholic liturgical function into a musical vehicle by which to explore, through non-liturgical and even non-Biblical texts, the meaning of death, mourning, and consolation.

BRAHMS (1833-1897) was thirty-one—almost exactly at the midpoint of his life—when his beloved mother died in early 1865. Within weeks, he began work in earnest on what would become the pivotal, as well as the largest, work of his career. The idea for a non-liturgical Requiem may have been spurred by his finding a sketch for “ein deutsches Requiem” among the effects of his close friend and mentor Robert Schumann after his death in 1856. Brahms at first thought of using his sketches as a memorial to Schumann, but that musical material became the D Minor Piano Concerto instead.

The Text

Brahms was well aware that he traveled in Beethoven’s shadow. “You have no idea,” he once said, “how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven”—he who had penned across his Missa Solemnis score, “From the heart—may it go to the heart.” Beethoven’s monumental work, completed in 1823, had stretched the boundaries of the Mass to a new frontier, freeing the music from the confines of the church liturgy into an art form that speaks as a complete entity in itself. Brahms was intent on writing a human Requiem, written in German rather than in liturgical Latin, as a Protestant counterpart to the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. The term “German” derived not from any nationalistic zeal, but from his upbringing amid the culture of North German Lutheranism. Beethoven had freed the music of the Mass while retaining the Latin text. Brahms went a step further by choosing non-liturgical texts, ones which echoed the familiar vernacular rhythms of Martin Luther’s 1534 German Bible.

Like Beethoven, Brahms had no specific religious training, nor was he a church musician, yet he knew the Bible intimately. Paul Minear suggests in his Death Set to Music that “the primary [text] selections were apparently made during a day spent in the woods near Hamburg, where [Brahms] was indulging his lifelong love of nature.” Carefully avoiding those that were explicitly Christian, Brahms chose Biblical citations from fifteen chapters of eleven books in the Old and New Testaments, and the Apocrypha. The resulting text of Ein deutsches Requiem, wrote Brahms’s pupil Florence May, “is arranged to present the ascending ideas of sorrow consoled, doubt overcome, and death vanquished.”

The Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, beginning with the introit “Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine” (Eternal rest grant them, O Lord), is a prayer for the dead. Brahms wanted to focus on the living, the sorrowful left behind. The opening Beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” is not exclusively associated with death. Thus, from the very beginning, Brahms stretched the canvas for the exploration of death and mourning onto a larger metaphorical framework. The first appearance of the word “death” (Tod) comes in the sixth movement. Even there, it is a reference to the vanquishing of a universal foe, rather than the passing of an individual.

When Karl Martin Reinthaler, organist and musical director of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Bremen, first saw the score, he was sufficiently impressed to schedule the world premiere performance. He was, however, concerned about the text of the Requiem and tried to convince Brahms to make alterations. “You occupy not merely religious, but essentially Christian ground in the
work. The second number already alludes to the prophecy of the Lord’s return, and in the next to last (VI) the mystery of the resurrection of the dead is treated in detail. The central point around which everything turns in the consciousness of the Christian is, however, absent. ‘If Christ be not risen then is our faith vain,’ says St. Paul. All the same you say: ‘Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord henceforth,’ which can only mean: since the accomplishment of Christ’s work of redemption….”

To this idea, Brahms rejoined: “As regards the text I will confess that I should gladly have left out the ‘German’ and substituted ‘human.’ Also that I dispensed with passages such as St. John’s Gospel, Ch. 3, verse 16, with all knowledge and intention. On the other hand, I have no doubt included much because I am a musician, because I required it, because I cannot argue away nor strike out a ‘henceforth’ from my venerable parts.”

First Hearings
The Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna performed the first three movements on December 1, 1867, at a concert in memory of Franz Schubert. Unfortunately, the third movement was a disaster because the timpanist played the “D” pedal point loudly throughout, thereby drowning out the cumulative impact of the choral performance. One of Brahms’s closest friends, Theodor Billroth, felt that the composer’s deliberate avoidance of audience-pleasing effects made the work too austere for the Viennese. “This Requiem is so nobly spiritual and so Protestant-Bachish that it was difficult to make it go down here. The hissing and clapping became really violent; it was a party conflict. In the end the applause conquered.”

On Good Friday, April 10, 1868, Brahms conducted the first performance of the now-complete Requiem at Bremen Cathedral in the presence of his father and many friends, but most important, his beloved friend Clara Schumann, whom he escorted to her seat just minutes before the concert. Several instrumental pieces were inserted in the middle of the Requiem, after which followed not only the aria “I know that my Redeemer liveth” and the “Hallelujah” chorus from Handel’s Messiah, but also “Erbarme dich” from Bach’s St. Matthew Passion.

Shortly after the first performance, Brahms added a soprano solo with chorus as the fifth movement. (Had he been influenced by hearing the soprano sing “I know that my Redeemer liveth” at the Bremen concert?) Ein deutsches Requiem was first performed in its final seven-movement form, on February 28, 1869, conducted by Carl Reinecke in the Leipzig Gewandhaus. An additional twenty performances within the year firmly established Brahms as primus inter pares.

The Completed Requiem
There is a stylistic symmetry between corresponding movements. Part I (“Blessed are they who mourn”) is reprised in Part VII (“Blessed are the dead”). Part II (a funeral cortège) and Part VI (victorious battle over death) culminate in fugues. Parts III and V are dialogues between soloists and chorus. The fulcrum is Part IV (“How lovely are Thy dwelling places”), an idealized vision of the “courts of the Lord.”

Although the score bears no dedication, perhaps a tacit one is reflected in the soprano solo: “I will comfort you, as one whom his mother comforts.” The majority of the work was composed at Baden-Baden during the summer following his mother’s death. An English professor once observed that, when he probed the lives of his most creative students, “I discovered that almost always someone near to them had died recently. It is as if the departed ones were able to bestow added awareness, added creativity.” Could the death of Brahms’s mother have opened up in some mystical way the door to her son’s most creative period? Of Brahms’s 122 works, two-thirds were written or completed after the Requiem. By the time of his death, the name of Brahms was spoken as part of a trilogy of musical immortals—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.

He had moved out from the shadows.