

Brahms - Beethoven - Mozart

Performed March 26, 2000

The *Alto Rhapsody* is intimately tied to Brahms' complicated relationship with the Schumann family. Robert Schumann had been an early and important supporter of the young Brahms and the Schumanns served as a kind of surrogate family to him. When Schumann attempted suicide in 1854 and had himself institutionalized, the 21-year old Brahms helped support the family financially and even took over running the household at one time while Clara Schumann prepared to resume her career as a pianist.

At some point during this period Brahms had fallen deeply in love with Clara. It is not known to what extent Clara returned his feelings, but after Schumann died in 1856 she made it clear to Brahms that they could not have the life together that he envisioned. They nevertheless maintained a close if somewhat curious relationship. Clara clearly had proprietary feelings toward Brahms, for she actively discouraged his few serious relationships with other women. Brahms was content to maintain his intimacy with the Schumann family, and Clara remained a close friend and confidant.

It was some years later that Brahms fixed his affections on Clara's oldest daughter Julie. Characteristically, he never explicitly made his feelings clear to Julie (or to Clara), and Julie at least was totally unaware of his infatuation. When Julie announced her engagement to an Italian nobleman in 1869 Brahms was devastated, and he wrote the *Alto Rhapsody* in response. He took a section of Goethe's poem *Hartzreise im Winter* ("Winter Journey in the Hartz Mountains") which describes the poet's meeting with a young man who withdrew from the world following an unhappy love affair. Brahms presented the work to Julie as a wedding present. It seems a rather heavy-handed gesture, but Clara for one was delighted with the work, confiding to her diary that she wished Brahms could be as eloquent in person as he showed himself in this music.

Brahms himself was more than ready to assume the role of unrequited lover. He exemplified that peculiar species of German romanticism which consisted in equal parts of an all-embracing love and optimism for mankind as a whole coupled to a deep personal sense of fatalism and pessimism. Brahms identified with E.T.A. Hoffman's fictional violinist Kreisler, who was socially inept and became evermore isolated personally even as his career as a musician advanced, and Brahms continued to sign his letters as Kreisler Junior until he was nearly thirty. His feelings may be summed up in the first line of the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, written about the same time: "Abandon all hope when you embark upon the sea of love."

Musically, the *Alto Rhapsody*, with its long vocal lines and soaring melody, has a lot in common with the soprano solo movement of the *German Requiem*, which Brahms also was working on about this time. After a brief orchestral introduction, the soloist enters in music which becomes progressively more agitated as the despair of the scorned lover is revealed. The music softens as the men's chorus enters at the last verse in a hopeful prayer for consolation and redemption.

The *Alto Rhapsody* continued to figure somewhat unhappily in Brahms' life. During his

lifetime the greatest interpreter of the work was Amalie Joachim, the wife of the violinist and conductor Joseph Joachim. Joachim was already an internationally acclaimed soloist when he chose the eighteen year old Brahms as his accompanist. Joachim was not only Brahms' closest friend but also had provided him with his introduction to Robert and Clara Schumann. When Joachim filed for a divorce from Amalie in 1880, Brahms took her part and wrote her privately, decrying Joachim's suspicion and jealousy. Brahms was considerably dismayed when Amalie introduced the letter in court in her successful attempt to contest the divorce. The affair caused a rift in his thirty-year friendship with Joachim that was never fully healed.

Beethoven *Choral Fantasy*

The story of the *Choral Fantasy* actually begins with the *Mass in C*, which Beethoven had written in 1807 for the name day of the wife of Prince Nicholas II Esterházy. The prince was a member of the directorate that oversaw the Royal Imperial Court Theater. Beethoven had submitted an unsuccessful proposal to the directorate that he be given a contract at a fixed salary and in return he would produce one opera per year. Beethoven had hoped to win the prince's favor with the mass, but it turned out otherwise. The unmusical prince found the mass "utterly ridiculous and detestable" and offended Beethoven at the public reception following the premiere with the remark "My dear Beethoven, what is it you have done here?" Beethoven was too confident in the value of the mass, as well as too good a businessman, to let the mass go and was negotiating to have the mass published.

With this in mind, he decided to showcase the mass at a mammoth Akademie (self-produced benefit concert) in 1808 which also featured the premieres of his fifth and sixth symphonies and his fourth piano concerto. Beethoven wanted a grand finale to close the concert but did not want to hold the fifth symphony until the end, so he decided to compose a work which would open with piano, then bring in the orchestra, the vocal soloists and finally the chorus. He quickly had a text prepared according to his own ideas by Christoph Kuffner, a poet of his acquaintance, and barely completed the score in time for dress rehearsal. Unfortunately the *Choral Fantasy* fell short in providing the stirring climax that Beethoven intended. There was some confusion in the orchestra and Beethoven, conducting from the piano, was forced to angrily stop the piece and restart it.

Modern audiences usually hear the *Choral Fantasy* as a precursor to the ninth symphony, a work to which it does bear great resemblance. But it is also a marvelously constructed piece that blends many seemingly disparate elements. The piano opening offers a rare chance to hear the improvisation for which Beethoven was famous as a performer. (Beethoven improvised the part for the premiere but notated it later for publication. And evidently Beethoven intended for this piece always to be conducted from the piano, for he marked the soloist part with indications for cues to the orchestra and chorus.)

The orchestra enters in an exquisite set of variations, again anticipating the final movement of the ninth symphony, which also unfolds as a set of variations. The soloists and chorus enter with a text that is similar not only in tone but also in melody to the *Ode to Joy* which he set for the ninth symphony.

Mozart *Requiem*

When Mozart arrived in Vienna in 1781 it was with the idea of finally leaving the employ of the Archbishop of Salzburg. Mozart was twenty-five and fresh from an operatic triumph with the premiere of *Idomeneo* in Munich. He was convinced that his prospects in Salzburg were limited and unlikely to improve. Michael Haydn was firmly in control as Kapellmeister and Mozart had held only minor positions as court composer and keyboardist.

Archbishop Colloredo was a vigorous reformer and something of a freethinker (he kept a portrait of Voltaire in his study), but he was also the son of one of the wealthiest, and by all accounts one of the most irresponsible and profligate, of Vienna's nobles and Colloredo was determined to show that he could be an able and prudent administrator. While he kept a large musical establishment, he did not entertain in the lavish fashion that Joseph Haydn's employer Prince Esterházy did, and he had no interest in opera. After the success of *Idomeneo*, Mozart felt more and more that his true calling was opera, and the center of the operatic world in the empire was Vienna.

While it was a risky venture for Mozart to arrive in Vienna without any definite prospects, he did have reason to be optimistic about his future. He was already well known as a composer and performer and the Emperor Joseph II was not only a music patron but was also a particular fan of Mozart as a keyboardist. The emperor had also just created a new German National Theater to promote native German opera, and Mozart was immediately commissioned to write *Die Entführung aus der Serail* ("The Abduction from the Seraglio") for the inaugural season.

Now opera was the one genre in which Mozart could truly be said to be an innovator. Mozart demanded an unprecedented realism in plot and character development in his operas, and he tried to work closely with the librettist to achieve this end, an unheard of practice. Most of his contemporaries accepted a clear division between the libretto and the music; Salieri would never have dreamed of asking the librettist for changes. Mozart also put something of his view of the world into the opera. In particular he believed that people should succeed through merit, and it was the source of a great deal of personal consternation that his talent never allowed him automatic access to the higher social strata that he thought he deserved.

Something of this can be seen in *Die Entführung*. The nobility are somewhat wooden and ineffectual, the servants far more colorful and resourceful, and readily able to manipulate their noble masters. And in the kind of plot twist that Mozart relished, the resolution depends on the generosity of the Turkish Pasha, who shows himself to be on a much higher moral plane than his Christian adversaries. (This was not a particularly astute political move. The Turks and Austrians had been hereditary enemies for centuries and tensions were currently running high. Within just a few years the two empires would actually be at war.)

After the premiere Joseph II is supposed to have said to Mozart "So many notes," but if the opera failed to please the emperor it was because of its unorthodox treatment of the subject rather than its musical complexity. Mozart's subsequent operas (and he produced them at the rate of one a year during his decade in Vienna) followed a similar pattern and it is easy to see why he was not exactly embraced by either the nobility or the opera establishment. While Mozart never obtained the official positions of Kapellmeister or director of the opera that he sought, he was nevertheless very successful as a composer

and performer and by all accounts earned a considerable sum in fees and commissions.

Unfortunately he was totally undisciplined, spent lavishly when he had money and borrowed when he didn't. The late 1780's were difficult for Mozart. Austria had been engaged in a disastrous war with the Ottoman Empire and the wartime economy had offered him little opportunity to earn money. His wife Constanze had been seriously ill and required expensive treatments at the mineral spas at Baden. He was carrying a number of debts, including a substantial judgment against him won by Prince Karl Lichnowsky. (This must have seemed the height of irony to Mozart. Lichnowsky had been a friend and traveling companion of Mozart on trips to Prague and Germany, and Mozart himself had loaned the prince a large sum of money in 1787.)

But by 1791 he must have thought that his fortunes were finally about to improve. There was a new emperor and Mozart had been commissioned to write an opera for the coronation (*La clemenza di Tito*.) He had successfully applied for the post of Kapellmeister at the Cathedral of St. Stephen (which possibly explains the motet *Ave Verum Corpus* and some smaller organ works that he composed that year.) He had commissions for a clarinet concerto, piano concerto, and the opera *Die Zauberflöte* ("The Magic Flute").

And then there was the *Requiem*. The *Requiem* was commissioned anonymously but with a substantial fee. The commissioner was one Count Walsegg-Stuppach, an amateur musician who intended the work as a memorial for his wife, who had died earlier that year. Walsegg was in the habit of commissioning works, copying them out in his own hand and having them performed, creating the impression that he was the composer. Mozart accepted the commission, but continually postponed working on the *Requiem* to accommodate his other projects. He began serious work on the *Requiem* in the fall of 1791, but his health had already begun to fail, and he soon began to entertain the morbid notion that he was writing the *Requiem* for himself.

He died on December 5, 1791, leaving the *Requiem* unfinished. Constanze needed the *Requiem* completed to collect the balance of the commission fee, and approached two of Mozart's students, Joseph Eybler and Franz Xaver Süßmayer, to complete the work. Eybler, the more talented of the two, felt unequal to the task and it was Süßmayer who actually completed the score. The *Requiem* was first performed in 1792 at a benefit performance arranged by his sometime patron Baron van Swieten. Constanze also sold the rights to the *Requiem* to Mozart's publishers. Walsegg was furious and threatened a lawsuit. He eventually did conduct a performance of his commission in 1793.

At the time of his death Mozart had completed the *Introitus* and sketched out the vocal lines and orchestration for the *Kyrie* and *Sequentia* (up to the *Lacrimosa*), and *Offertorium*. Mozart had discussed the *Requiem* from his sick bed with Süßmayer and others, explaining for example the planned reuse of material from the *Kyrie* in the *Communio*. Süßmayer may have used other material of Mozart's in the *Agnus Dei* and perhaps also in the *Benedictus* and the fugue in the *Sanctus*, all of which seem to rise to a level that Süßmayer's other music never achieved. In 1971 the musicologist Franz Beyer reorchestrated the score and corrected what in his opinion were particularly egregious musical errors introduced by Süßmayer, and it is this reconstruction which is being performed this evening.

The *Introitus* opens with an orchestral melody which conveys both a sense of tragedy and

a certain nobility. There is no hint of supplication, however, when the chorus enters on the *requiem æternam* text ("grant them eternal rest"), which seems almost declamatory in nature. This same tone is adopted almost every time that the text refers to the third person: the *Kyrie*, much of the *Sequentia*, and especially the *quam olim Abrahamæ* text in the *Offertorium*, in which God is reminded of his promise to Abraham and his descendents. It is almost as if Mozart is demanding that God uphold his part in a bargain. It is when the text turns to the first person (*salva me, save me; voca me cum benedictis*, "call me among the blessed"; *gere curam*, "protect me") that the music becomes intensely plaintive, a very striking contrast. Mozart had written relatively little sacred music and seems to have taken Handel as a model, especially apparent in the strongly rhythmic, dotted melodic lines and running eighth note counter melodies.

But he also filled the Requiem with his own typically distinctive touches. He sets the *Kyrie* as a complex double fugue with the *Kyrie eleison* text as the first subject and the *Christe eleison* as the second, brilliantly disguising the three-fold symmetry of the underlying prayer. Mozart was clearly inspired by the dramatic potential of the *Sequentia*, with its graphic descriptions of the Day of Judgment. There is an almost theatrical drama and tension, with frequent and abrupt changes in dynamic, tempo and mood. In fact some of the music, like the opening of the *Confutatis* and the bass line in the *Lacrimosa*, which ascends a chromatic scale in octave leaps, bears a passing resemblance to the last scene in *Don Giovanni*, in which the statue drags the unrepentant Don into Hell.

Mozart also takes the opportunity for some exquisite musical imagery: the quavering bass line on the text *quantus tremor est futurus* ("how great the trembling will be"), the falling tears in the orchestral accompaniment to the *Lacrimosa*, the unison octaves of the lion's open mouth in the text *de ore leonis* ("deliver them from the lion's mouth") in the *Offertorium*. And in a final, wonderful touch, Mozart reprises the opening music in the *Communio*, creating not only a sense of unity in the music but also a sense of completion as well.

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