

MENDELSSOHN CLUB

O F P H I L A D E L P H I A

Alan Harler, Artistic Director
John French, Associate Conductor

PROGRAM

Wiegenlied, Op. 49, No. 4

Jennifer Beattie, alto

O die Frauen (Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 52, No. 3)

Daniel Matarazzo and Cory O'Neill Walker, tenors
Daniel Moore and Changho Lee, basses

Wie des Abends schöne Rote (Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 52, No. 4)

Katherine Akinskas and Maura Caldwell, sopranos
Megan McFadden and Jessica Muniz, altos

Vom Gebirge Well' auf Well' (Neue Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 65, No. 7)

Mendelssohn Chamber Singers

Am Donaustrande (Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 52, No. 9)

Mendelssohn Chamber Singers

Versicht, o Herz, auf Rettung (Neue Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 65, No. 1)

Mendelssohn Chamber Singers

Donald St. Pierre and Susan Nowicki, piano

Hungarian Dance No. 5

Donald St. Pierre and Susan Nowicki, piano

Nänie, Op. 82

Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
Donald St. Pierre and Susan Nowicki, piano
Stephanie Wilson, oboe

Ein deutsches Requiem, Op. 45

1. *Selig sind die da Leid tragen*
2. *Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras*
3. *Herr, lehre doch mich*
Robert Joubert, baritone
4. *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen*
5. *Ihr habt nur Traurigkeit*
Erin Swanson, soprano
6. *Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt*
Robert Joubert, baritone
7. *Selig sind die Toten*

Alan Harler, conductor
Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
Alan Morrison, organ

Sunday, October 24, 2010
4:00 pm
First Baptist Church

PROGRAM NOTES

This afternoon's all-Brahms Big Sing is a departure from the usual concert format, and is designed to allow the audience to experience choral music from the inside out. We have dispensed with the traditional barrier between performers and listeners: the chorus and the audience sit mixed together. The chorus is not strictly arranged by voice part, so the listeners in the audience will hear each vocal line clearly. The deliberate use of piano or organ accompaniment rather than an orchestra also allows the vocal lines greater prominence and clarity. Finally, audience members are invited to join Mendelssohn Club in the performance of Brahms' beautiful and moving *German Requiem*. Maestro Harler will discuss each movement and briefly rehearse key sections, so the audience will gain a unique insight into both the structure of this remarkable work and also its performance practice.

With the tremendous popularity of Brahms' orchestral music, it is easy to forget that he was also an outstanding and prolific composer of vocal music. His 18 large scale works for chorus and orchestra are the most significant part of his output, but he also composed more than 200 songs, 80 vocal duets and quartets, and 13 works for unaccompanied chorus. Brahms was also a very successful choral conductor, founding the Hamburg Frauenchor (Womens' Choir) and conducting the prestigious Vienna Singakademie for several years. He once turned down the directorship of Vienna's premier ensemble, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, when he learned that the duties would not include rehearsing the chorus.

The concert opens with what is undoubtedly Brahms' best-known melody, the *Wiegenlied* (Cradle Song), better known as *Brahms' Lullaby*. The syncopated accompaniment, based on an Austrian folk melody, suggests the rocking of a cradle. Brahms included it in a set of five songs. While they don't represent a song cycle, Brahms did select the songs to be published together with a great deal of care, referring to the sets as bouquets, and they had a sort of thematic unity for him. In this case, the other four songs deal with unrequited love and separation and longing for peace in death, which gives an added poignancy to the *Wiegenlied*, recalling a time of innocence when Paradise might truly be glimpsed in a dream.

The balance of the songs comes from two volumes of *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, originally arranged for vocal quartet and piano duet. The first volume was published in 1868 and was an enormous popular success. Brahms provided additional arrangements for piano duet, piano four hands and for orchestra, and wrote a second set in 1874. The songs show Brahms at his best as a musical colorist and demonstrate his absolute mastery of the favorite musical form of his adopted Vienna. The songs are not, however, what you might expect of love songs. The overall tone of both sets is rather more dark and cynical, dwelling more on the vicissitudes of love than its joys. The lyrics of the first song in the *Neue Liebeslieder Waltzes* succinctly summarizes Brahms' theme: "Abandon all hope of salvation if you embark upon the sea of love!"

There was a saying in Vienna that the Orient began on the road to Hungary. Even though Hungary had been part of the Austrian empire since the 16th

century, there was an exotic quality to its language and customs and especially its music that fascinated the Viennese. Brahms completed a set of 21 *Hungarian Dances* in 1869. Like the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, they were enormously popular and Brahms provided arrangements for solo piano and for orchestra to complement the original piano four hands version. The *Hungarian Dance No. 5* is undoubtedly the best known, a lively csárdás (a characteristic folk dance) based on a tune by the Hungarian violinist and composer Kéler Béla.

Johannes Brahms wrote *Nänie* in 1881 to commemorate the death of his friend the artist Anselm Feuerbach. Like the earlier *Deutsches Requiem*, its theme is consolation rather than mourning, and its unusual text is taken from a poem by Schiller. Schiller's allusions to classical Greek mythology provides a fitting memorial for an artist whose paintings were inspired by Greek mythology, but perhaps require some elaboration. The first few couplets refer to the legendary singer Orpheus. Disconsolate after the death of his wife Eurydice, he undertook a journey to the underworld, where his plaintive singing softened the heart of Hades, ruler of the underworld. Hades agreed to allow Eurydice to return to the upper world on the condition that Orpheus neither speak to her nor look back at her during their ascent. Overcome by doubt on the long upward journey, Orpheus could not restrain a backward glance. To his dismay, he saw the shade of Eurydice reaching out to him as she vanished in the mist.

The next allusion is to Aphrodite, goddess of love, who was herself smitten with the handsome youth Adonis. Unaccountably, Adonis preferred hunting to amorous pursuits and was fatally wounded by a wild boar (which the uncharitable suggested was sent either by Aphrodite's jealous lover Ares, god of war, or her long-suffering husband Hephaestus, god of the forge). From Adonis' blood, the rose sprang forth.

The balance of the poem deals with the story of the mighty hero Achilles, son of Thetis, a sea deity, and a mortal, King Peleus of Thrace. Thetis tried to protect Achilles from his mortality, dipping him as an infant into the river Styx to give him invulnerability to wounds. He grew up to be a great warrior and joined the Greeks in the siege of Troy. He could not, however, escape his destiny and was mortally wounded when he was shot through the foot with an arrow, that being his only vulnerable part since Thetis had held him by the feet when she immersed him in the Styx.

Brahms joins Schiller in making classical allusions. In this case, the first three chords of *Nänie* mirror the opening of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 26, "Les Adieux,"* where Beethoven had written the word *lebewohl* (farewell) over the first three chords. Brahms' setting also mirrors the form of Schiller's poetry. The long, haunting melodic line reflects the cadence of the verse. Each couplet is concluded with a characteristic hemiola (the imposition of a duple rhythm on an underlying triple meter), a musical punctuation mark. *Nänie* contains some of Brahms' most beautiful and moving choral writing, especially in the central section where the gods and goddesses rise up out of the sea to lament the death of Achilles. The Greeks would commemorate the death of a hero with a funeral celebration which included athletic competitions as well as laments (*neniae* in Latin) which not only mourned the death of the hero but

also recounted his deeds and life. Perhaps the glorious lament on the lips of loved ones should be understood in this context, the consolation that the dead are kept alive in the memories of those that loved them.

Brahms' *German Requiem* is one of the truly great works in the choral literature – breathtakingly beautiful, daringly unconventional and deeply moving. What is more remarkable about this piece is that it was only Brahms' second major work and marked the end of what was essentially a long and self-imposed apprenticeship period following the critical failure of his *Piano Concerto No. 1* in 1859.

Brahms began the *German Requiem* in 1865, shortly after the death of his mother. Within two months he had sketched out four movements, but the work had a typically long Brahmsian gestation period and was not ready for performance until 1867. Brahms somewhat reluctantly agreed to let Johann von Herbeck and the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna's premier ensemble, perform the first three movements, probably in part because Brahms hoped to succeed the aging Herbeck as music director of the Gesellschaft. The performance was less than a success. The conservative, Catholic Viennese did not know what to make of Brahms' nontraditional choice of text, and the timpanist, misreading Brahms' markings, thundered away during the fugue which closes the third movement. Critical response was mixed but lively, with supporters praising its lyricism and originality and detractors calling it "a requiem for good taste."

Brahms meanwhile had been arranging the premiere of the full work (which at that time comprised six movements) under his own direction at the cathedral in Bremen on Good Friday, April 10, 1868. The premiere was well publicized, drawing a large audience including many prominent musicians, and was an immense success. The work was published almost immediately, with Brahms adding an additional movement, placed fifth in sequence, for soprano and chorus. Within a few years the *Requiem* had been performed all across Germany and Austria and had reached as far as Paris, London and St. Petersburg. Brahms' reputation as a major composer had been firmly established, and perhaps more importantly to him, he had finally fulfilled Schumann's prediction of greatness made some fifteen years earlier.

Brahms' selection of text for the *German Requiem* was quite unconventional. Rather than setting the familiar Latin Mass for the Dead, he instead carefully selected texts from the Lutheran translation of the bible emphasizing consolation and acceptance. The texts avoid explicit Christian theology; in fact the name Jesus Christ never even appears, and Brahms suggested that he might well have substituted "human" for "German" in the title. Perhaps it is the universality of the feelings expressed in the texts Brahms so carefully chose which makes this requiem so deeply moving.

In its final form the *German Requiem* has a rather symmetrical construction. The first and last movements are quiet and introspective, with their similar texts dealing with consolation and acceptance. The second and sixth movements contain the most dramatic music, and both end with massive choral statements. The third and fifth feature the baritone and soprano soloists with

the chorus quietly adding assent. All surround the beautifully lyrical central movement.

The *German Requiem* is based on a chorale tune, *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* (He who waits upon the loving God), although Brahms never explicitly quotes the material. It appears first in the arch-like orchestral music that opens the first movement. The chorus enters *a cappella* in a countersubject with a typically Brahmsian long melodic line. Brahms accomplishes the difficult feat of giving both the chorus and orchestra music of equal weight and importance here and throughout the *German Requiem*. The second movement opens with an eerie funeral march in three quarter time based on material from an abandoned D-minor symphony. The chorus enters with a unison counter melody, again loosely derived from the chorale tune.

The third movement evolves rather freely in form, opening with the baritone solo reflecting on the transitory nature of earthly life and the chorus softly echoing his words. The *durchkomponiert* character of this movement may also represent an homage to Schumann, who developed that style in his lieder. The movement ends with a massive fugue, one of two in the *German Requiem*. Brahms' extensive use of polyphony and counterpoint perplexed his supporters and led his critics to pan his music as unnecessarily intellectual. Brahms, however, had sound musical reasons for everything he did, and he clearly understood how the musical form of the fugue would enhance the effect of text. Brahms had carefully chosen texts expressing what he considered the essence of faith, and the repetition created in the fugal form provides a powerful sense of reinforcement and affirmation. Brahms' musical treatment of this fugue, however, is anything but Baroque. He maintains a D pedal throughout the fugue, which introduces unusual tension during the fugue's development but also provides a strong sense of resolution at its conclusion.

The intensely lyrical fourth movement provides an emotional high point for the *Requiem*, like a Brahmsian vision of heaven. Brahms uses a variety of rhythmic devices to diffuse the waltz-like character of the music. The fifth movement, shortest of the seven, is built around a soaring soprano solo and the very moving text "I will comfort you as one whom a mother comforts."

The sixth movement, like the second, opens with a march-like section "For we have no abiding place here," but the baritone quickly introduces the most dramatic music in the *Requiem*, set to the familiar text of the resurrection of the dead at the sound of the last trumpet. The intensity builds as the chorus enters, reaching a magnificent climax with the text "Death, where is your sting! Hell, where is your triumph!" before closing with a majestic fugue.

The final movement opens with a chorale-like melody of great nobility, again set against a beautiful orchestral counterpoint. The text echoes that of the opening movement as well, and at the end Brahms even reprises the opening music of the first movement, but now in the key of E-flat. After a brilliant series of modulations Brahms returns to the opening key of F as well, and the *Requiem* ends quietly on the same word *selig* (blessed) with which it began.

– Michael Moore