

Johannes Brahms's *Requiem* eines Unpolitischen

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*Searching for Common Ground: Diskurse zur deutschen Identität 1750-
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Here they talk and talk; he is silent. There the almighty racket of oh-so progressive and fine-sounding theories. Here active silence, silent action.

—Wilhelm Furtwängler¹

It is easy to attribute all sorts of motives to a man who is not keen on answering and explaining.

—Johannes Brahms²

In a letter of 24 April 1865, Johannes Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann of a “choral piece” he was projecting. Never sure whether or not his compositions would end up at the end of a lighted cigar, Brahms asked that she “read here the beautiful words with which it begins” since “this may yet evaporate to nothing.” He then copied out the first two stanzas of what indeed came to be *A German Requiem*, op. 45:

Blessed are they that mourn,
for they shall be comforted.
They that sow in tears
shall reap in joy.

They go forth and weep,
and bear precious seed
and come joyfully
bearing their sheaves.

Indicating that “I compiled the text for myself from the Bible,” Brahms then related words from the second movement:

For all flesh is as grass
and the splendor of man
is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers
and the flower falls away.

“You could appreciate such a German text as much as the customary Latin one, couldn’t you?” he asked Clara, “I have high hopes for putting together a unity of sorts, and hope to retain courage and desire for once.”³

Here Brahms hinted, in his usual cryptic and modest way, that he was composing his first grand work since Robert Schumann had prematurely announced that the “Young Kreisler” (as he often signed himself) was “fated to give the highest expression to the times.” Brahms worked intensively on the piece from February to December 1866. A preliminary run-through of the first three movements took place at the Vienna Musikverein in December, 1867, and the first complete performance occurred on Good Friday, the 10th of April, 1868 in the Protestant cathedral of Bremen. Through 1869 and 1870, *A German Requiem* was performed in churches and halls across German and Austrian lands, including Köln, Leipzig, Basel, Hamburg, Karlsruhe, Münster, Zurich, Dresden, and Kassel. The first full Vienna performance took place in 1871, while Berlin and München waited until 1872.⁴

From the first critical responses, it was clear that Brahms had produced the “masterpiece” (in the original sense of the word) required at that stage of his career.⁵ Responding to the partial performance in Vienna, that

³ Brahms, Johannes, *Life and Letters*, ed. Styra Avins, trans. Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 321.

⁴ Michael Musgrave, *Brahms: A German Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8, 64.

⁵ Apart from the musical, scholars have posited a number of possible motivations behind Brahms’s work on this composition. Among his friends, it was widely assumed that the composer associated it with the death of his mother, which had occurred one year earlier, in 1865. Referring specifically to the fifth movement (which Brahms added after the work’s premiere but had apparently conceived beforehand), Clara Schumann commented that “we all think he wrote it in her memory though he has never expressly said so” [cited in Musgrave, *Requiem*, 12]. It has also been suggested that Brahms decided upon a *Requiem* instead of a symphony for his first major public work as a gesture to his late friend, benefactor, and hero, Robert Schumann. Later, when arrangements were being made for a Schumann

¹ Wilhelm Furtwängler, *Notebooks 1924-1954*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London, NY: Quartet Books, 1989), 212.

² Brahms, Letter to Joseph Joachim, 1873, cited in Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (NY: Schirmer, 1990), 394.

city's leading music critic, Eduard Hanslick, asserted that "*A German Requiem* is a work of unusual significance and great mastery. It seems to us one of the ripest fruits to have emerged from the style of the late Beethoven in the field of sacred music."⁶ Adolf Schubring, another friend and critic, also extolled the *Requiem* on first hearing: "as artful and serious as Sebastian Bach, as elevated and powerful as Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, . . . [it is] saturated in its melody and harmony by Schubert's benevolent influence."⁷ Thus, it was with *A German Requiem* that Brahms started to make himself one of the "Three Bs."

However, contemporary reception—even from what came to be the "Brahms circle"—was not wholly uncritical. The composer's close friend, Theodor Billroth, had concerns about the dark tone of the *Requiem* and feared that this limited its appeal in Catholic Austria: there was "too little of the sensuous in his art both as composer and pianist. . . . His *Requiem* is nobly spiritual [yet] so Protestant-Bachish that it was difficult to make it go down here."⁸ The *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* complained that "the work lies in the direction of . . . ascetic Christian-German composition, which hinders us in warming towards his inspiration,"⁹ and Leipzig's *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* found it just "too contemplative."¹⁰

Summarizing the contents of *A German Requiem* will illuminate both sides of its initial reception. As today's biographers and musicologists agree, it is above all Brahms's choice of texts that mark his *Requiem* as unique. Most of his predecessors had employed the Latin text of the Mass or the *Requiem* Mass in their religious works. There were precedents for using German translations of the Latin texts, but Brahms broke from both of these traditions by substituting an entirely original concatenation of scripture. In his own direct words, he "compiled the text for himself from the Bible" and it is as simple—and complicated—as that.¹¹ Musicologist Michael Musgrave, who traced each of the selections, comments that "Brahms did not seek to take his subject

from any one part of the Bible or topic within it . . . Rather he relates his sources to themes of his own and creates a uniquely personal, non-dogmatic sequence of thoughts."¹²

Scholars also agree that Brahms's text was addressed primarily at those who survive the death of loved ones, offering comfort in the form of a broad statement that the dead will experience spiritual transformation and, eventually, a state of rest after their labors.¹³ Patience in the face of the "bleak reality of the transience of life" was Brahms's prescription,¹⁴ and it is the laconic quality of this sermon that surprised, disappointed, and even scared some of his friends and first listeners. Most disturbing to many was the fact that there is no reference to Christ in the text of Brahms's *Requiem*.¹⁵ The person most responsible for the work's premiere at the Bremen cathedral, organist Karl Reinthaler, complained to Brahms that "for the Christian mind . . . there is lacking the point on which everything turns, namely the redeeming death of Jesus."¹⁶ Brahms's was hope born of despair: "Even if the words came from the Bible," his most recent biographer asserts, "this was his response to death as a secular, skeptical, modern man."¹⁷

Musically, it is also apparent why Brahms's *German Requiem* was immediately associated with the most "serious" strains of composition. In Musgrave's analysis, "not only does it reflect the years of technical exploration in the sphere of unaccompanied choral music—the mastery of counterpoint, of unusual and historically oriented harmonic effects, and of vocal groupings and colors—but, equally, the larger world of the cantata, oratorio, and concert settings of liturgical texts. It thus spans a period from the Renaissance to

memorial celebration in Bonn, Brahms refused requests that he produce a tribute to his mentor, insisting instead that *A German Requiem* was already most appropriate for the event.

⁶ Cited in Musgrave, *Requiem*, 61.

⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, 64.

⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, 61.

⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18. To a great degree, this information about Brahms's selection of texts helps us to understand at least one part of the work's title. The most recent biography asserts that by calling it "*A German Requiem*" (*Ein Deutsches Requiem*)—emphasizing the indefinite article—Brahms conveyed that this was a very personal testament: *A Requiem* among others [Jan Swafford, *Brahms: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 317].

¹³ MacDonald, *Brahms*, 196.

¹⁴ Musgrave, *Requiem*, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷ Swafford, *Brahms*, 317.

Beethoven and to Brahms's immediate predecessors.¹⁸ Within this wide range of music-historical references, it was above all the tradition of German chorales, especially those of Bach, that Brahms incorporated into his "Prize Song."¹⁹ Brahms himself hinted that the entire work rested on the melody of Bach's chorale, *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*.²⁰ But it was not just Bach's melodies that interested Brahms. Again, Musgrave: "In the work's actual musical character, there is also a remarkable blend of past and present elements, not least in harmonic language. At the very opening of the choral part Brahms presents a progression of juxtaposed triads which draw directly from the manner of the choruses to *Altddeutsch* texts": though "blended with modern unprepared sevenths, . . . it is very difficult to divorce this passage from a parallel setting by Schütz."²¹ And, of course, the deepest connections between *A German Requiem* and the German church music tradition are extensive fugues which close the second, third, and sixth movements. Identifying these precedents for important components of Brahms's *Requiem* should in no way minimize appreciation for its original, even "modern" features.²² But in the earliest stages of reception, it was largely such musical references to *altddeutsch* masters, Schütz, and Bach that gave Brahms's *Requiem* a reputation for having "too little of the sensuous," being "contemplative," and even "hindering us in warming toward his inspiration." Moreover, it is such

¹⁸ Michael Musgrave, *The Music of Brahms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 79.

¹⁹ Musicologists have little difficulty establishing close connections between *A German Requiem* and various chorales of Bach. Brahms was deeply involved with the study of Bach's cantatas while preparing *A German Requiem*: a subscriber to the Bach Gesellschaft Edition he had access to them all; as choral master of the Singverein in Vienna, he had lead performances of at least two.

²⁰ Musgrave tells us that "this passage represents the work's embryo" since it is unmistakable in the *Requiem's* opening and the march of the second movement. Close analysis reveals that Brahms made explicit references in his *Requiem* to this and at least two other works by Bach, *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* and *Wer weiss wie nahe mir mein Ende* [Musgrave, *Music*, 79-84].

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84

²² *Ibid.*, 87.

elements, especially the references to Bach's chorales that—in a musical sense alone—indicate precisely what was "German" about Brahms's *Requiem*.²³

With this general discussion of *A German Requiem's* musical content, I arrive at the issues that this paper is intended to address. What *is* "German" about Brahms's *German Requiem*? Should it be considered an icon of late nineteenth-century German nationalism? And what does it tell us about Brahms's identity and the extent to which it was "German"? On the surface, circumstances tend to make answers to these questions seem rather obvious: completed in the same year that "German" Prussia fought Austria in a limited war, *A German Requiem* ostensibly matched the Latin mass at a time when Germans were on the verge of competing with "Latin" countries—especially France—for their "place in the sun." Moreover, in the ensuing Franco-Prussian War, it is said that *A German Requiem* was performed to memorialize Germans killed in the conflict that brought about unification of the north German principalities as a modern nation.²⁴ Therefore, establishing the *Deutschtum* of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* and its north German creator is apparently a straightforward undertaking. However, as is so often the case with Johannes Brahms, nothing is so simple as it appears.

Despite the confluence of nationalist circumstances around Brahms's work on the *Requiem*, the majority of scholarship to date has disassociated it from emergent German national culture. For example, in 1990, Winfried Döbertin asserted that *A German Requiem* is "universally-human," and in 1991, John Eliot Gardiner referred to it as Brahms's "*Human Requiem*."²⁵ A few factors justify this "humanist" interpretation of the *Requiem*. First, it is clear from his correspondence in 1866—when he composed the bulk of the *Requiem*—that Brahms was *not* in favor of Prussian policy as determined by Bismarck. Living primarily in Vienna, he was not enthusiastic when war broke

²³ "It is the 'choralness' of many of the motives in the *Requiem* (as well as the use of actual chorale melodies) that makes it 'really' German: I don't think there was anything quite as German to the nationalists as a good German chorale" [Dr. Mark Knoll, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, email to the author, 14 March 1999].

²⁴ Avins, ed., *Life and Letters*, 413; Musgrave, *Requiem*, 67. I have not yet seen primary source confirmation of this claim.

²⁵ Cited in Daniel Beller-McKenna, "How *deutsch* a Requiem? Absolute Music, Universality, and the Reception of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, op. 45," *19th-Century Music* (Summer 1998, vol. XXII, no. 1), 4.

out between Prussia and Austria. In a letter to Julius Allgeyer written on 10 May 1866, as international tensions mounted, Brahms complained that “unfortunately, whether they now fight for 30 or for 7 years, the war is as little on behalf of mankind as in those days when they did fight for 30 and 7 years.”²⁶

Now, it is important to acknowledge that the composer's attitude toward Bismarck and his policies underwent significant change over the next few years. During the war of 1870-71, Brahms expressed genuine patriotic fervor: at the age of thirty-seven, he even considered volunteering for service.²⁷ Ultimately resigned to his civilian status and observing events from Austria, Brahms vented his patriotism in letters stating that he “wait[ed] eagerly for the French to get a good thrashing” and “dearly wishe[d] [he could] be in Germany now. . . . Even though one can't join in the shooting, one wants to see compatriot soldiers and be at home when victory is proclaimed.”²⁸ Upon German unification and victory, the composer committed the most patriotic act of his creative life, producing the *Triumphlied*, op. 55. Originally subtitled “On the Victory of German Arms,” he dedicated this “festal song” to Wilhelm I, “Most Illustrious, Most Powerful, Most Gracious Kaiser and Master!”²⁹ Finally, Brahms developed in 1870 genuine admiration for Bismarck, purchasing and pouring over his speeches, and for the rest of his life kept the Chancellor's picture on his wall — crowned with a laurel wreath and right next to his bust of Beethoven.³⁰

Furthermore, respect for imperial authority triggered by the Franco-Prussian War lasted through Brahms's life. In 1888, Brahms staunchly defended a particularly undiplomatic statement made by the then new Kaiser Wilhelm II. Referring to the contested Alsace region, Wilhelm barked that “every stone would remain German even if it took the slaughter of eighteen army corps and 42 million Germans laid out in a row ‘like animals killed in the hunt.’” A Liberal friend of Brahms complained about this imperial bombast, but the composer stood firm as a loyal subject: “You confer respect and honor on the individual great person—but not on a lineage like the Hohenzollerns

²⁶ Brahms, letter to Julius Allgeyer, 10 May 1866, *Letters*, 341.

²⁷ MacDonald, *Brahms*, 141; Swafford, *Brahms*, 357.

²⁸ Brahms, letter to Johann Jakob Brahms, 5 August 1870, *Letters*, 414.

²⁹ Swafford, *Brahms*, 357-59.

³⁰ Avins, ed., *Life and Letters*, 413.

with Friedrich II and Wilhelm I? You have respect for every young man who . . . strives towards a far-off goal—but not for a youthful new Emperor of the German people, who has surely prepared himself earnestly and with dignity for his high and difficult office, [and] who may well still fulfill all kinds of hopes[?]”³¹

Nonetheless, scholars have heretofore been careful to avoid projecting Brahms's enthusiasm for Prussian policy after 1870 onto an earlier phase of his life. Because it is clear that as of 1866 he “had not yet been won over to the *kleindeutsch* Prussian cause and still had misgivings about Bismarck,”³² *A German Requiem* has not been anachronistically linked to Brahms's later approval of the north German national option.³³ But this historicist perspective has not been the only reason for de-emphasizing the “German” connotations of Brahms's *Requiem*. On 16 February 1869, Brahms responded to Adolf Schubring's deep musicological analysis of *A German Requiem* by asking sarcastically, “Is it possible that you haven't yet discovered the political allusions in the *Requiem*?” and noting — again sarcastically — that “It starts right away with *Gott erhalte*—in the year 1866!”³⁴ The impish irony with which Brahms revealed this parallel between the opening phrase of his work and the melody of the Austrian (later German) national anthem was a not-so-gentle way to refute Schubring's literal interpretations in general. It has been taken as a very strong hint from the composer himself that *any* politicization of *A German Requiem* is quite ridiculous.

However, the firmest basis for the “universal” interpretation of the work is another statement by the composer himself. As preparations for the Bremen premiere were underway in 1867, Brahms wrote to Karl Reinthaler that “as far as the text is concerned, I confess that I would very gladly omit the ‘German’ and simply put ‘Human.’”³⁵ Reference to this statement has been

³¹ Brahms, Letter to Josef Viktor Widman, 20 August 1888, *Letters*, 660.

³² Beller-McKenna, “How *deutsch*?” 6.

³³ Indeed, there has been little need to draw such connections to the *Requiem*, given the much clearer patriotic message he conveyed via the *Triumphlied*.

³⁴ Brahms, letter to Adolf Schubring, 16 February 1869, *Letters*, 382-383.

³⁵ Brahms, letter to Karl Reinthaler, 9 October 1867, *Letters*, 353.

the crux of every variation of the “humanist” interpretation of *A German Requiem*. Through the twentieth century, this quote was accepted as incontrovertible evidence that, despite its title, Brahms conceived the work as a statement of non-denominational religious values, referring to it as “German” only because he borrowed its text from the version of the Bible that he read in his mother tongue.

Very recently, however, this view of Brahms’s “human” statement, and consequently *A German Requiem* itself, has come under reconsideration. In a 1998 article, Daniel Beller-McKenna attacked the “universal” interpretation of the piece as a “late-twentieth-century construction of meaning” designed to salvage a component of the German music tradition that was “largely appropriated by the National Socialists in the middle of our century.”³⁶ “Given that Brahms’s *Requiem* was composed primarily in 1866, the year of the divisive war between Prussia and Austria, and quickly entered the repertoire during 1869-70, on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War,” Beller-McKenna insists, “a reexamination of the reference to universality in the . . . reception of the piece is warranted.”³⁷ “It is unlikely,” he continues, “that Brahms’s proposed substitution of *menschen* for *deutsch* [*sic*] should be understood as a straightforward affirmation of universal expression over national sentiment. Rather, [this] speaks more to our own values as manifested in words like ‘human’ than to those of Brahms’s milieu.”³⁸ According to Beller-McKenna, by taking “Brahms’s and others words out of context to support our own world view” (by which he means post-1945 humanitarianism), we have “lost sight of how German a *Requiem* this was.”³⁹

So, the question as to what is German about *A German Requiem* remains open. On the one hand, the work is held to be an expression of humanitarian values of universal validity. On the other, some argue that it must be associated with the main “German” issue of its age, namely the rise of Prussian authoritarianism. In considering both sides of this debate, it has gradually become apparent to me that the conflict is largely founded on the notion—predominant since at least 1945—that the terms “German” and “Human” should be understood as mutually exclusive. Beller-McKenna argues that we err in assessing Brahms because—reading through our post-

Auschwitz lenses—we misapprehend the significance of the term “Human” in the German discourse of his day. However, I would like to consider for a moment whether it is the word “German” that we misconstrue, for the very same reasons: perhaps we have forgotten that it was once possible to consider oneself a German (even a patriotic one) *and* a humanist.

Meditating on this matter, I am reminded of Thomas Mann’s collection of wartime essays, *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, perhaps the most extensive articulation of a pre-1945 German self-image as humanist. There, Mann defended the German tradition of *Bildungsbürgertum* as worth fighting a war to protect because this way of life, in his opinion, was deeper than that of Western democratic societies. Although now strange to our ears, Mann made a case for a Romantic, conservative, even authoritarian outlook as a more genuine standard for existence than mass democratic society aimed primarily at material progress. Reading these essays, we can develop a better sense of how a writer whom we tend to consider representative of “modernist” tendencies could align himself with German political conservatism. We refer to Mann as the “ironic German” on the basis of myriad issues which he treated in multi-perspectival ways. But it perhaps the irony of his wartime politics that we have the greatest trouble accepting or even comprehending. Mann’s primary goal in writing *Reflections* was to articulate how an artist with modernist sensibilities could consider the political status quo in Wilhelmine Germany more conducive to his lifestyle than Western democracy *cum* entrepreneurial capitalism would be. To do so, Mann highlighted qualities common to the tradition of creative Germans as he saw it and tried to demonstrate that these attributes thrived best in a society wherein individuals may lead wholly “non-political” lives—i.e. unconcerned with the daily management of social affairs. If depth of insight—a “serious” approach to life—were predicated on the authoritarian conditions prevalent in Germany, mankind as a whole would suffer should democratic-utilitarian reform eliminate those conditions. In Mann’s mind, defense of German *Kultur* was a defense of global humanist interests, not mere German patriotism.

To support this argument, Mann invoked a number of German creators whose approach to life and art would be eradicated with defeat of German authoritarianism. Among those engendered and nourished in a “non-political” environment were, he argued, the “three stars of his firmament”: Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche. But of his triumvirate, Mann emphasized Wagner as best representing the features of the non-political German artist. Over time, this aspect of Mann’s argument has become more and more problematic. Knowing what we now know (or rather, emphasizing what we now emphasize) about Wagner’s character, post-1945 readers of

³⁶ Beller-McKenna, “How deutsch?” 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Mann's *Reflections* have difficulty comprehending his assertion that this particular composer was "apolitical."

However, it seems to me that if—for at least an experimental moment—we substitute within Mann's characterization the life, personality, and art of Brahms, we might attain a better sense of what the author was trying to defend—unclouded by perceived complications in the case of Wagner. In doing so, we must keep in mind that Mann's goal was not to outline characteristics unique to Wagner and the other heroes he mentioned, but to demonstrate that tendencies he perceived in them were common to creative Germans. On one level, this is a test to see if Mann's assertions have any broader application at all. If they work for the supposed "anti-Wagner," then they might (despite troubling associations with the First World War) be reconsidered as a framework for understanding self-perceptions among mid- to late-nineteenth century German artists as a whole—coming as they do from one whose other writings are considered among the most perceptive observations of fin-de-siècle psychology.

Some might question whether Mann's writings from 1914 to 1918 can be legitimately employed to investigate the mindset of Brahms working in the eighteen sixties and seventies. But Mann's reflections on "Germanness" clearly encompassed the late-nineteenth century leading up to the war, and he readily evoked earlier creators—from Goethe and Schopenhauer through Wagner and Nietzsche—to express the close identifications he felt with them. Frankly, the views of Mann, whose life-span did overlap with Brahms's, seem at least as useful as more recent theories about national identity in Wilhelmine Germany—severed, as these are, from Brahms's context by experiences (or imagined experiences) of the Second World War. Whatever the broader implications of this approach, I believe that by considering how Brahms *also* embodied the type of German that Mann extolled, we can better apprehend some of the apparent contradictions in that composer's personal and creative constitution, including the dichotomies of *Bürger*/esthete, secular/Protestant, classicist/Romantic, modernist/conservative, apolitical/political, Liberal/monarchist, and most broadly, Human/German.

In his salient interpretation of Thomas Mann as the "ironic German," Erich Heller pointed out that "What condemns the [*Reflections of a Non-Political Man*] to their agonizingly sustained inconclusiveness is precisely this: that their author is caught in the paradoxical enterprise of establishing

irony as a mode of ethical and even religious existence."⁴⁰ More pointedly, Mann was struggling to establish irony as the principle mode of German existence. In *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, Heller goes on, "Mann has created the largest hero in whom to embody the soul divided in itself . . . : Germany—the country of the unquestioning discipline and the undisciplined ecstasies, of soldiers and mystics, of engineering and romantic music, of aggressive energy and metaphysical excess."⁴¹ In short, it is a complicated synthesis of apparent opposites that Mann posed as comprising the "German identity" he defended during the Great War. "Romanticism, nationalism, burgherly nature, music, pessimism, humor—these elements from the atmosphere of the past age form the impersonal parts of my being," he wrote,⁴² indicating that these "impersonal parts" were characteristics that he held in common with fellow Germans of his time. I think that Johannes Brahms shared many of these attributes, with all the irony of a German soul divided in itself.

Fundamental to Mann's paradoxical self-image was the notion of a "burgherly nature" that served as the foundation for his artistic evolution. In *Reflections* he addressed explicitly the issue underlying so much of his fiction: "May the artist, the gypsy, and libertine not forget . . . that there is a good bit of the German burgher in him. . . . What I experienced and formed . . . was a development and modernization of the burgher: not his development into a bourgeois [i.e. 'capitalist exploiter'], but his development into an artist."⁴³ Essential to this burgherly inheritance, for Mann, was "the will to faithful workmanship."⁴⁴ Borrowing from Lukacs, he insisted that the source of all his creative achievements—no matter how "libertine" their ultimate tone—was burgherly respect for "what is systematically and regularly repeated."⁴⁵ The outcome of work was less important than the process that went into it: consistently applying a rule that Mann learned from Schopenhauer—"writing

⁴⁰ Erich Heller, *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1961), 137.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴² Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, Walter D. Morris, trans. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 97-99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

for publication only during the first two morning hours"—and being certain that “this is absolutely the best I could do.”⁴⁶

Those who are familiar with Brahms's biography and lifestyle will have no trouble confirming his burgherly characteristics: both contemporaries and latter day scholars have consistently identified them. Writing to Clara Schumann, the painter Adolph Menzel observed, “What I like about him is that he is the only one of our famous men who lives in the most humble bourgeois circumstances. His rooms are not half as high or as big as yours, and you have never seen a studio furnished with such supreme simplicity.”⁴⁷ Peter Gay consolidated many such impressions of the composer: “The mildest of debauches apart, he lived soberly, modestly, solemnly; his lifelong bachelorhood is a symptom of bourgeois cowardice rather than a badge of bohemian freedom. There was no madness in his life, as in that of his beloved Schumann; he provoked no salacious scandals such as those marking the life of Liszt; he made no move to compete with Wagner in prophesying a new religion of art. Brahms sought financial security, practiced innocent pleasures, enjoyed decent company; he was a slave to the ethic of work, much like a bank clerk or shopkeeper. He had been a young man of almost ethereal beauty who entered—almost fled into—middle age behind the appropriate disguise of a bushy beard, the very emblem of respectability.”⁴⁸ According to musicologist Arnold Schering, moreover, the middle-classes liked the “self-restraint and rigor” of Brahms's compositions, finding in them indications of “hard work and willed accomplishment.”⁴⁹

But of course, burgherly nature was only one thesis in Mann's perception of the German character: driving the dialectic was internal conflict “between burgher and artist.”⁵⁰ “An artist, I think, remains to his last breath an adventurer of feeling and of intellect, tending toward deviousness and the abyss, open to the dangerous-harmful element. His task itself requires

psychological-intellectual freedom of movement; it demands from him that he be at home in many, and also in evil worlds; it tolerates no settling down on any truth and no dignity of virtue. . . . The artist is and remains a gypsy, even assuming that he is a German artist of burgherly culture.”⁵¹ Invoking Eichendorff's *Memoirs of a Good-For-Nothing*, Mann suggested that for all his disciplined procedures, the output of a German creator “to a truly immoral degree is devoid of virtue as I understand it . . . political virtue, that is.” Eichendorff's novel, he continued, is “anything but well-bred; it lacks every solid center of gravity . . . it is nothing but dream, music, letting go, the floating sound of a posthorn, wanderlust, homesickness, luminous balls of fireworks falling in a park at night, foolish blissfulness, . . . so that one's ears ring and one's head buzzes with poetic enchantment and confusion . . . a symbol of pure humanity that is touching and cheerful in its unpretentiousness, of affable humane-romantic humanity, . . . of the German human being.”⁵²

For all his burgherly work habits, reserved bearing, and “formal” compositional style, Brahms too was also a deeply Romantic esthete. Even before meeting Schumann and sharing his obsession with the aesthetics of rupture underlying works of Jean Paul and E. T. A. Hoffmann, Brahms had assumed a wholly romantic persona, consistently referring to himself as “Young Kreisler.” Later, writing to Clara Schumann in 1854, Brahms conveyed his sense of being a “Doppelgänger,” identifying with Hoffmann's hero and even Eichendorff's “good-for-nothing”: “I often quarrel with myself, that is, Kreisler and Brahms quarrel with one another. But usually each has his decided opinion and fights it out. This time, however, both were quite confused, neither knew what he wanted, it was most comical to observe it. Anyway, tears almost came to my eyes. Now . . . some bit of Eichendorff is let loose: dark midnight, slumbering fountains murmuring, confused voices, and a deep melancholy of the heart.”⁵³

Brahms's romantic leanings could also find very positive, Papageno-like expression, for instance in this letter of 1859: “I am in love with music, I love music, I think of nothing but, and of other things only when they make music more beautiful for me. . . . If it continues like this I may evaporate into a

⁴⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

⁴⁷ Adolph Menzel, letter to Clara Schumann, cited in MacDonald, *Brahms*, 395.

⁴⁸ Peter Gay, “Aimez-Vous Brahms? On Polarities in Modernism,” in *Freud, Jews, and Other Germans* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 237.

⁴⁹ Cited in Margaret Notley, “Brahms as Liberal: Genre, Style, and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna,” *19th Century Music* 17 (1993), 113.

⁵⁰ Mann, *Reflections*, 78.

⁵¹ Ibid., 294.

⁵² Ibid., 273-78.

⁵³ Brahms, letter to Clara Schumann, 15 August 1854, *Letters*,

chord and float off into the air.”⁵⁴ However, Brahms was not without what Mann described as tendencies toward “deviousness and the abyss,” the “dangerous-harmful element,” even “evil worlds.” For all his apparent “Father Christmas” qualities, communicated most strongly by the “appropriate disguise” Gay says he “fled into” once middle-aged, Brahms could be profoundly skeptical and pessimistic. Brahms did assume a “German identity”—the burgherly identity most safe and useful for him—and in doing so seemed to perpetuate and validate that identity for genuine burghers who wanted an artist among them. But, the fact that even his closest friends could never fully understand his moods—that he often became frustrated and insulted them—is a sign that there were cracks in the armor.

In Mann we find much discussion of the pessimism resulting from the ambiguous status of the German artist he identified. “My nature is such that doubt, yes, despair, seems to me more moral, decent, and artistic than any kind of leader-optimism. . . . I not only believe that doubt makes one more human and kinder than belief, fanaticism, the arrogance of the possession of truth and ‘resolute love of mankind,’ I even believe that despair is a better, more human, more moral—I mean, more religious condition than the rhetorical faith of revolutionary optimism, and that the human race will be closer to salvation in a state of despair than in one of belief—in democracy!”⁵⁵ An artist, in Mann’s opinion, who is “so at peace with his conscience, so lacking in all irony, so much at harmony with his humanity, so virilely satisfied with his work, all in all so civically solid that he would find the gait with which the ordinary citizen, sure of his cause, strides to the ballot box to exercise his right to vote . . . such an artist is hard to imagine.”⁵⁶

Despite his rather cheery posture as an “ordinary citizen,” Brahms was in no sense an artist “at peace.” Borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche—“honest but gloomy”—Mann emphasized the “severity of German life” in the nineteenth-century;⁵⁷ it would be an apt moniker for Brahms as well—perhaps even better than the one he chose for himself (*einsam aber froh*). Responding to questions about dark passages in his Second Symphony, the composer wrote “I would have to admit that I am a deeply melancholy person, that black wings

constantly rustle over us.”⁵⁸ And of course, these black wings do seem to rustle in Brahms’s works. Biographers and musicologists have long tried to find words suitable for conveying the autumnal quality that marks much of his music: “a bleak description of humanity below, wracked by confusion and despair”; “jagged music of blind and dwindling Mankind, whose confusion and restlessness are depicted in powerfully agitated syncopations and cross-rhythms that fall with sledgehammer blows”; “a deeply personal lament for his isolation”; “the fate of the man weighed down by fruitless struggles against the iron bonds of misery”; “melancholic works (in the sense of a Düreresque *Melencholia*).”⁵⁹

The last comparison is a remarkable echo of Thomas Mann’s reflections on pessimism running through his notion of German identity. Again referring to Nietzsche, he extolled the philosopher as “the one who singled out from all plastic art one picture—Dürer’s *Knight, Death, and the Devil*—with lasting love; the one who told Rohde of his natural pleasure in all art and philosophy in which ‘ethical air, Faustian smell, cross, death, and grave’ could be detected: a phrase I immediately seized upon as a symbol for a whole world, my world—a northern-moral-Protestant . . . German one.”⁶⁰ Ultimately, in Mann’s view, the “formula and basic definition of all romanticism”—and German culture as a whole—was “sympathy with death.” And even here, we find strong resonance in the character of Brahms. Proof I offer in the form of a single quote. In 1875, Brahms wrote to his publisher recommending a cover design for the forthcoming String Quartet, op. 60: “You might display a picture on the title-page. Namely a head—with a pistol pointing at it. Now you can form an idea of the music! I will send you my [own] photograph for this purpose! You could also give it a blue frock-coat, yellow trousers, and riding boots, since you appear to like color prints.”⁶¹ I believe this citation speaks for itself of “ethical air, Faustian smell, . . . death, and grave.”

As for the “cross,” both Brahms and Mann were undeniably products of the “northern-moral-Protestant” world. Though “embattled with a skeptical imagination and a rational conscience,” as Heller wrote, Mann

⁵⁴ Brahms, letter to Auguste Brandt and Bertha Porubsky, 9 October 1859, *Letters*, 202.

⁵⁵ Mann, *Reflections*, 381-382.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 345.

⁵⁸ Brahms, letter to Vincenz Lachner, August 1879, *Letters*, 552.

⁵⁹ MacDonald, *Brahms*, 203-204.

⁶⁰ Mann, *Reflections*, 399.

⁶¹ Brahms, letter to Franz Simrock, 12 August 1875, in *Letters*,

perceived the church as central to his German aesthetic of despair: "As far as I am concerned, I have always loved time spent in churches. . . . Two steps aside from the amusing highway of progress, and you are surrounded by an asylum where seriousness, quiet, and the thought of death have their proper places, and where the cross is raised for adoration. What a blessing! What *satisfaction!* Here one speaks neither of politics nor of business. The human being is a human being here, he has a heart, and makes no secret of it. Here pure, liberated, nonbourgeois, solemn humanity rules."⁶² Furthermore, Mann observed, "ever since Luther's religious-musical influence . . . German music from Bach to Reger has been the *punctam contra punctam*, the great fugue, not only the resonant expression of the Protestant ethic, but with its powerfully polyphonic joining of self-will and subordination, the image and the artistic-spiritual reflection of German life itself."⁶³

For confirmation of comparable views in Brahms, I turn to biographer Malcolm MacDonald. "His knowledge of Scripture was deep and subtle . . . yet the Bible seems to have furnished him merely with the patterns and standards of human conduct, and in his daily life there is no shadow of specifically Christian belief or even any tenuous sense of an afterlife. . . . 'Such a great man! Such a great soul! Sorrowed Dvorák, with simple Catholic piety, 'And he believes in nothing!' That was not quite true. He believed in the best aspects of humanity . . . and in music's power to give it transcendent and autonomous expression."⁶⁴ In MacDonald's opinion, "the paramount examples" of Brahms's northern-moral-Protestant expression are the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121, "which proclaim with such supreme poignancy that all things are uncertain save death itself, that a man should rejoice in his works, and that the only thing worth having is love, whose source may be divine but whose expression is human."⁶⁵ Yet nowhere were these notions more deeply inscribed than in Brahms's first masterwork.

Heller aptly perceived that "at the troubled heart of *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* is a religious imagination and religious conscience in conflict with a skeptical mind" and suggested that this paradox is "the deepest source of Thomas Mann's irony."⁶⁶ Subtle ironies underlying Johannes Brahms's

selection of Scripture for *A German Requiem* were precisely what maddened and fascinated contemporary listeners—and contemporary scholars still wrestle with them. "Though all the texts of the *Requiem* are biblical," Musgrave observes, "Brahms can be seen considerably to weaken the Christian meanings through his precise selections and juxtapositions: his text sequences are interesting for what they omit as well as what they include. He focuses on comfort, hope, reassurance, and reward for personal effort, conspicuously avoiding judgment, vengeance, religious symbols, and—above all—the sacrifice of Christ for human sin."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the overarching theme of his *Requiem* is "hope for some ultimate happy resolution, the reward for effort."⁶⁸

With such ironies inhabiting the work—especially but not only skeptical belief in the face of death—is *A German Requiem* not yet another profound expression of the "soul divided in itself" that Mann underscored as central to his version of nineteenth-century German identity—at least among artists? Brahms's life, character, and other works strongly manifest the complex of burgherly nature, romanticism, pessimism, sympathy with death, and secularized Protestantism, and all of them resonate powerfully through his *Requiem*. But what about the politics? How is it possible to square Brahms's

⁶⁷ As traced by Musgrave, other omissions indicate—by their absence—how Brahms evaded dogma. The first movement, derived from *The Beatitudes* given in the *Sermon on the Mount*, expresses only assurance that the sorrowful shall find consolation, without indications that Christ's followers will "gain the kingdom of heaven, have the earth for their possession, see God, and be sons of God." The second movement leaves out mention of "the divine vengeance through which the way of holiness is prepared." In the third movement, "the affirmation that 'the righteous souls are in the hand of God' is presented without the original implication that this is through the agency of Christ and religious discipline." The fifth movement "is a personal hymn to consolation and comfort which removes the words from a Christian context, the voice of a god figure or of Christ, and gives them by implication to the voice of a mother." And for the sixth movement, promising transformation, Brahms deleted from his original texts all "references to physical resurrection," merely implying "a changed state, not through sacrifice, and with no reference to that of Christ" [Musgrave, *Requiem*, 21].

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2. See also Swafford, *Brahms*, 317 and MacDonald, *Brahms*, 200.

⁶² Mann, *Reflections*, 354.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁶⁴ MacDonald, *Brahms*, 396.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁶⁶ Heller, *Mann*, 144-146.

documented political conservatism with his reputation as humanist? Let us consider the issue once again through the lens of Thomas Mann. The primary feature of Mann's portrait of the "non-political" German is the fact that he is anti-democratic. From a post-1945 point of view, of course, this seems contradictory: an anti-democrat is, naturally, a political man; in fact, a political man of the most heinous sort—an authoritarian or even a fascist, certainly not someone devoted to furthering the interests of Humanity. Mann, however, saw it differently. To him, democracy—or universal involvement in the decision-making process—meant “the dominance of politics: nothing may, nothing will exist—no thought, work, or life—in which politics does not play a part.”⁶⁹

Democratization of German society—from his Wilhelmine viewpoint—threatened artists as he perceived them because they would no longer have the option to remain “non-political,” i.e. burgherly gypsies. Mann firmly believed that his opinion was shared by most Germans: “I believe that here all [political] talk and expression of opinion takes place under the pressure of such overpowering disdain and ingratitude that one is really victimized if one gets involved with it. I think, therefore, that all political palaver disgusts this nation in the deepest reaches of its soul.”⁷⁰ Above all, he felt, German artists had the most to lose if their nation were democratically politicized: “Art is a *conservative* power, the strongest of all; it preserves spiritual possibilities that without it—perhaps—would die out. So long as poets are possible—and they will always be so—whose wish is to lie down in the deepest woods to forget ‘these stupid times,’ . . . so long, I say, will the rule of that three-part equation [reason = virtue = happiness], will democracy on earth, not be secure. Let every utopia of progress, let the sanctification of the earth by reason . . . become reality. . . : art will still live, and it will form an element of uncertainty and preserve the possibility, the conceivability, of relapse. It will speak of passion and unreason, hold primordial thoughts and instincts in honor, keep them awake or reawaken them with great force. . . . War, heroism of a reactionary type, all the mischief of unreason, will be thinkable and therefore possible so long as art exists, and its life will last and end only with that of the ‘human race.’”⁷¹

It is not my intention to prove that Johannes Brahms would have wholly subscribed to Mann's brand of conservatism. However, I do perceive some parallels. First, apart from a very few exceptions, Brahms definitely exhibited the reticence about addressing political matters that Mann highlights in his “non-political” German. As the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (himself an exponent of this world-view) observed: “Here they talk and talk; he is silent. There the almighty racket of oh-so progressive and fine-sounding theories. Here active silence, silent action. There chatter about the future; here action in the interest of maintaining the future. . . . Brahms knew what Goethe knew: that there can be no development without man, beyond man. As a result he became the arch-enemy of all illusions.”⁷²

But, paradoxically of course, Brahms did occasionally emit political opinions. Despite his generally close associations with upper-middle-class, Liberal society—ultimately sharing their dismay over the rise of anti-Semitic, volkish ideologies—he did profess support of the new German empire and its Prussian rulers. Here I see yet another manifestation of Mann's dichotomous artist-type. As a burgher, Brahms identified with the measured progress promoted by Vienna's professional classes—to whom he owed his material well-being, after all. But as an artist—a Romantic gypsy, as it were—Brahms perceived the value of an imperial framework that would afford him the political insouciance necessary to continue “speaking,” in his music, “of passion and unreason . . . primordial thoughts and instincts.”

Brahms's *Requiem*, then. Political? In no sense of the word. A symbol of Germany? To be sure: “not only the resonant expression of the Protestant ethic, but with its powerfully polyphonic joining of self-will and subordination, the image and the artistic-spiritual reflection of German life itself.”⁷³ However, at the same time—borrowing once more from Mann—“a symbol of pure humanity . . . , of affable humane-romantic humanity . . . : of the German human being.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Mann, *Reflections*, 220.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁷² Furtwängler, *Notebooks*, 212.

⁷³ Mann, *Reflections*, 233.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 278.

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