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Brahms' Vier Ernste Gesange

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47

BRAHMS' VIER ERNSTE GESANGE

A Covering Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
Moses Turner
July 1970

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CENTRAL WASHINGTON STATE COLLEGE
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

presents in

Graduate Recital

MOSES TURNER, Baritone

JOHN DeMERCHANT, Piano

PROGRAM

I
Bois Epais Lully
Defend Her Heaven (Theadora)..... Handel

II
Vier Ernste Gesange Brahms

1. Denn es gehet dem Menschen. (Ecclesiastes, III)
"One Thing Befalleth the Beasts"
2. Ich Wandte mich. (Ecclesiastes, IV)
"So I Returned"
3. O Tod, Wie bitter (Ecclesiasticus, 41)
"O Death, How Bitter"
4. Wenn ich mit Menschen und mit engelzungen redete.
(I Corinthians, XIII)

INTERMISSION

III
II Balen (Trovatore)Verdi

IV
Psalm XXIIBloch
The Woodcutter's SongVaughan Williams
XangoVilla-Lobos

HERTZ RECITAL HALL
Tuesday, August 4, 1970
8:15 P.M.

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Education Degree in Music*

An integral part of this thesis (covering paper) is a tape recording of a graduate recital performed on August 4, 1970, as part of the requirement for the completion of this thesis.

APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

John DeMerchant, COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY	1
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	1
DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED	2
II. HIS LIFE AND MUSIC	3
III. CHARACTERISTICS OF STYLE IN THIS CYCLE	5
DENN ES GEHET DEM MENSCHEN	5
ICH WANDTE MICH	11
O TOD, WIE BITTER	13
WENN ICH MIT MENSCHEN	15
INTERPRETATION AND PERFORMANCE	18
IV. SUMMARY	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Vier Ernste Gesange, the last of Brahms' vocal compositions, represents the experience and maturity of a composer long regarded as one of the greatest. Written in anticipation of his own death, this composition tends to reflect the inner Brahms.

This, however, is scarcely consistent with his having already, on the 7th day of May, shown the composition to Max Kalbeck with the remark "this is what I have given myself for my birthday" (2:469).

I. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

An investigation into the style characteristics of Vier Ernste Gesange should help one to better interpret and perform the composition. Inasmuch as this cycle is one of Brahms' most introspective compositions, a study of this work would seem to have value for any singer.

II. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to the Vier Ernste Gesange cycle only, with reference to its characteristics of style and text.

III. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Vanity

Vanity in this study refers to the worthlessness of man when he is without faith, hope, love, or knowledge.

Song Cycle

A group of related songs designed to form a musical entity (1:795).

Chromaticism

The use of pitches not present in the diatonic scale but resulting from the subdivision of a diatonic whole tone into two semi-tonal intervals (1:164).

CHAPTER II

HIS LIFE AND MUSIC

Johannes Brahms was born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany. His family, of meager means, had to live in the slum-like area of the city. Even though the atmosphere of the slum was unfavorable to the development of a growing child, Brahms' parents attempted to provide an oasis of peaceful yet humble security in the home (4:14). From the moment of his birth Brahms' father had decided that he was to be a musician.

As a product of the romantic period Brahms, considered to be classical in form but romantic in content, shows influence of composers such as Bach, Mozart, Schubert and others. Certainly his career was enhanced by Schumann and his wife, Clara.

The young man adored Jean Paul Richter and Nouralis, called himself after the well known character in E. T. A. Hoffman's tale, Johannes Kreisler, Junior, and wrote melodies which were incomparably tender, sweet, and however pensive. Later on these traits became less obvious; always, however, Brahms loved the vogue twilight moods and unreal ghostly backgrounds (4:337).

The compositions of Brahms include chamber music, orchestral works, music for the piano, art songs, and others. Brahms excelled in all areas of composition except for opera, which he did not attempt.

Though displaying great emotion in his music, Brahms also showed an increasing respect for classical forms. While some composers, such as Liszt, displayed considerable freedom of form in their compositions, this was not the case with Brahms. For his own work he felt that obedience to law and strict articulation were indispensable, and he felt this more strongly as he grew older (4:337).

Johannes Brahms was a man of deep conviction and insight. His respect, knowledge, and belief in the Bible had a profound impact on his vocal compositions. In addition, his ability to select suitable text for maximum expression in such compositions as this cycle seem to be the result of some personal tragedy. For example, the last song of this cycle employs a text from the scripture read at the funeral of one of his dearest friends.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF STYLE IN THIS CYCLE

The cycle Vier Ernste Gesange, an excellent example of music enhancing the text, frequently in a minor mode, is well suited for the biblical text dealing with death. The text for these songs was taken from Ecclesiastes III, IV, V, and Corinthians XIII.

I. Denn es gehet dem Menschen

Text. One thing befalleth the beast and the sons of man: the beast die, the man dieth also, yea, both must die; to beast and man one breath is given, and the man is not above the beast; for all things are but vanity. They go all to one place for they all are of the dust and to dust they return. Who knoweth if a man's spirit goeth upwards, and who knoweth if the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth. Therefore I perceive there is no better thing than for a man to rejoice in his own works for that is his portion. For who shall ever show him what will happen after him (8).

The climate of despair is certainly evident, and the dramatic implications are enhanced by the music. Furthermore, great depth of meaning is realized in the German setting.

With its difficulty in articulation, the German must be emphasized in performing music of Brahms. The strong "T" at the end of words such as "STIRBT" in measure

two of the following example, and the "CH" found in "AUCH"
(measure four) illustrate such problems.

Example 1 (8:3).

Example 1 (8:3) musical score showing vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are:

Vieh; wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch, wie dies
men; the beast— must die. the man— di-eth

stirbt, so stirbt er auch;
al- so, yea, both must die;

p

Melody. Proceeding in a conjunct fashion in the first section of this section, the melodic line becomes more complex and chromatic in the second section. Minor triads are evident in the voice against a fleeting piano accompaniment.

Example 2 (8:5).

es for ist they al - les von Staub ge -
 for they all are of the

fp

macht,
 dust,

5 4

Vocal ranges in all songs of the cycle are rather extreme. The songs range from low "G" to "F" above middle "C". The following example shows a low range for the baritone voice.

Example 3 (8:7).

Er - de fah - re?
to the earth?

P poco rit.

The image shows a musical score for a baritone voice. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "Er - de fah - re?" and "to the earth?". The middle staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The bottom staff is another piano accompaniment in bass clef. The tempo marking "P poco rit." is placed between the middle and bottom staves. The score is handwritten and appears to be a study or working draft.

Harmony and tonality. Though generally traditional, the harmony is frequently chromatic, particularly in the accompaniment. However, such chromaticism employed in interpreting the text rarely interferes with the strong tonal feeling.

Example 4 (8:5).

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system features a vocal line in treble clef and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The vocal line has the lyrics "Es fährt" and "They go". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings *sf* and *sfp*. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics "al - les an ei - - - nen Ort;" and "all to one - - - - - place,". The piano accompaniment continues with similar dynamics. The third system shows further vocal and piano notation without lyrics.

Es fährt
They go

al - les an ei - - - nen Ort;
all to one - - - - - place,

The following example illustrates, in an effective harmonic structure, the repetition of such intervals as the fifth for dramatic effect.

Example 5 (8).

The musical score consists of four systems. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and piano accompaniment (bass clef). The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

System 1: The vocal line has lyrics "ihm" and "ge". The piano accompaniment features a prominent fifth interval in the bass line, marked with a forte (*sf*) dynamic. The piano part includes a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with sustained notes.

System 2: The vocal line has lyrics "kap - - - - - pen". The piano accompaniment continues with the same fifth interval pattern, marked with a forte (*sf*) dynamic.

System 3: The vocal line has lyrics "sche" and "hen". The piano accompaniment continues with the same fifth interval pattern, marked with a forte (*sf*) dynamic.

System 4: The vocal line has lyrics "ter" and "wird?" "him?". The piano accompaniment continues with the same fifth interval pattern, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic.

II. Ich wandte mich

The second song seems to increase in dramatic and emotional intensity. Beginning in the key of "G" minor, with an andante tempo, it ends in "E" minor.

Text. So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold the tears of such were oppressed and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power. Wherefore I possessed the dead, better is he which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work done under the sun (8:9-11).

What the preacher proclaims is an exorable fact; it is the music that changes it into an expression of overwhelming compassion. Everything turns into pure expression and flowing melody (6:199).

Melody. The unmistakable characteristic of Brahms' rich and ever flowing melodies dominates the second selection. Though generally moving in a conjunct and at times chromatic line, horizontal phrases are typical.

Example 6 (8:9).

Ar

Ich wand - - te mich und
 So I re - turn'd and

sa - - he an, al - le, die Un - recht lei - den
 did con - sil - - der all the op - press - ions

un - - ter der Son - ne;
 done beneath the sun —

As in the first song a wide range is evident.

Example 7 (8:10).

Da lob - te ich die To - ten, die
 Then I did praise the dead - - - ten, which

pp

III. O Tod, wie bitter

For the writer, the third song is the emotional climax of the entire composition. The message of the text poses for the performer the task of expressing musically the "awful string of death" from two very different perspectives.

Text. The essence of the text as it relates to the first point of view is that for those whose life is filled with joy, success, happiness, health and position, the string of death is indeed bitter (8).

Interpretation and tonality. In E minor, this composition opens without a piano introduction. While the melodic contours again enhance the text, the performer must, through vocal coloration, also provide for a deep

sense of meaning, for the phrase, O Tod, followed by wie bitter requires great dramatic ability.

Example 8 (8:12).

Grave.

O Tod, o Tod, wie bit - - - ter, wie bit -
O death, O death, how bit - - - ter, how bit -

In contrast to the first part, the text remarks that while death is very bitter for those who have much and enjoy life to the fullest, it is reverently welcomed by those whose life has no meaning or promise of fulfillment.

Example 9 (8:13).

O Tod, o Tod, wie bit - - - ter, wie bit -
O death, O death, how bit - - - ter, how bit -

Example 9 (continued).

wohl
wel - - come

tust
thy

du
call

dem
to

Modulating to the key of E major from the opening section in E minor, a measure and a half of the new key assists the singer in projecting the mood for the humble welcome of death. The song ends in E major, giving an atmosphere of the joy of death.

IV. Wenn ich mit Menschen

The last of the four songs begins brightly in Eb major in four-four time. The text is from I Corinthian, Chapter 13.

Text. Though I speak with tongues of man, and of angels, and have not charity, then I become sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. And though I can Prophecy and understand all mysteries and am powerful in knowledge; and though I have the gift of faith and can move mountains but have not charity, yet I am nothing worth (8).

These words whose meaning is obvious take on more

significance with a thriving melody that changes the mood completely from that of the other three songs.

Melody. This song has the most difficult and disjunct intervals of the cycle. Though long horizontal phrases are encountered, the contours are more angular, with a G above middle C (optional) to a G below middle C. General melodic character may be observed in the following example.

Example 10 (8:15).

und hät-teder Lie - - - be nicht, so wär ichein tö - nend
and have not cha - - - ri - ty, then am I be-come as a

Erz, o - der ei - ne klin-gen-de Schel-le.
sound-ing brass or a tin - kling cym-bal.

The musical score consists of four systems. The first system shows a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *p*. The third system shows a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The fourth system continues the piano accompaniment in bass clef.

Though melodic intervals are rather complex, the accompaniment frequently supports the vocal line by doubling.

Example 11 (8:16).

Und wenn ich al-le mei - ne Ha-be den Ar - men gä-be, und
 And though I give my world - ly goods to feed the poor, and

lie - sse mei-nen Leib _____ bren-nen mei-nen Leib _____ bren - nen;
 though I, give my flesh - ly bo - dy, my, body to be burn - ed,

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower two staves. The piano part includes dynamic markings of *f* and *p*. The second system continues the vocal and piano parts, with dynamic markings of *sp* and *sf* in the piano accompaniment. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

INTERPRETATION AND PERFORMANCE

As previously stated, the dramatic text obviously requires a singer with sensitive interpretation as well as an excellent technique.

Technical demands are obvious in (1) the length of the cycle (18 minutes); (2) in dynamic variations through long phrases, requiring good breath control; (3) a wide vocal range with uniformity of production; and (4) a thorough understanding of the German language.

Even a cursory examination of the text should indicate that this cycle obviously requires sensitive and dramatic interpretation. The singer must have an excellent insight of introspective and moral value for the text to be rendered in a sincere way. Perhaps this ability is the most important factor of all for a successful rendition.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

The song cycle, Vier Ernste Gesänge, is one of Brahms' most introspective compositions. Influenced by earlier forms and composers, he also displays the emotional style of romantic composers.

Requiring great dramatic ability, the cycle requires a performer sensitive to the text, vocal coloration, and melodic phrases. This is particularly true in the second song, Ich Wandte Mich, and the third song, O Tod, Wie Bitter.

An understanding of various harmonic devices and tonalities employed in conjunction with the melodic line is necessary for the fourth song, Wenn Ich Mit Menschen.

Though an excellent vocal technique is necessary for performing this cycle, the greatest demand is in sensitive interpretation.

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