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SIEGFRIED KROSS

THE CHORAL MUSIC OF JOHANNES BRAHMS

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Preface

The curious lack of appreciation with which the choral works of Brahms had met in the early part of this century, and which the author discusses in the opening of this essay, is in some ways still felt in our time. None of the numerous articles submitted to this journal over the years has dealt with the choral music of Brahms.

It seemed all the more challenging to devote one of the issues scheduled for the current Brahms anniversary year to the composer's large and significant choral *oeuvre.* The author, who holds a professorship at the University of Bonn, is one of the leading Brahms scholars today. He published his doctoral dissertation in 1957 under the title *Die Chorwerke von Johannes Brahms,* and it is gratifying indeed that he has added to this earlier work a new study on the subject for publication in the *American Choral Review.*

Professor Kross discusses Brahms's choral writing in these pages against the background of the composer's entire creative career. It is equally interesting to consider Brahms's choral works in this discussion in details of their reception, their performance practice, and their key role in his life work. It is a Brahms biography written from the point of view of the development of his choral style.

Included are all of Brahms's choral works bearing opus numbers (a few occasional works, a larger collection of folk-song arrangements not published during the composer's life, and his *Canonic Mass* are still for the most part inaccessible). Faced with the wealth of existing material, it was not easy to select suitable illustrations. Some of the well-known larger works available in study scores were omitted in this process because of the problem of reproducing excerpts from orchestral scores, and the editor must take responsibility for the choice of examples — as he does for the English adaptation of the original German text. He is indebted to Professor Jurgen Thym, his colleague at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, for much-valued suggestions and help offered in sharing these rewarding tasks.

A chronological listing and a topical index are added at the end of the volume to round out a total representation of Brahms's work as a choral composer.

—A.M.

The Choral Music of Johannes Brahms

A few years before the outbreak of the First World War, new ideals of choral music and choral sound began to take hold in circles of the German Youth Movement. With them a particular attitude towards practices of communal singing arose which found a typical formulation in the silly slogan-like postulate to "de-Brahms" German music (i.e., to cleanse it of Brahmsian influences). With a certain feeling of resignation, one might today raise the question: Which one of the blunders was worse, the blunder to identify — of all forms — the stylized and highly refined madrigal with the ideal of communal singing (mistaking the term *musica reservata* for "reserved" or non-subjective music), or the blunder to identify Brahms — of all composers — with the type of purely subjective artist?

Reger's description of Brahms's "colossal emotion" illustrates how thoroughly rooted this prejudice was in a professional world that should have known better. But along with the general decline of choral music in Germany — which was due to various sociological reasons — Brahms's music disappeared from the choral repertoire, although it had initially been so influential in spreading his fame.

Brahms, totally piano-oriented in his early work, had become interested in choral writing through the influence of Robert Schumann. True to Romantic Palestrina worship, Schumann was in the habit of urging young musicians to study the works of the golden age of polyphony in order to absorb the *Gesangsgeist* — the spirit of vocal writing. Schumann, like all Romantics, was captivated by the "pure *a cappella* sound" as a specific concept derived from a romanticized Palestrina image; he himself had become familiar with this image through his early association with Justus Thibaut, one of the founding fathers of the so-called Caecilian movement of Palestrina veneration.

Brahms conscientiously followed Schumann's advice, yet his interests departed from Schumann's Romantic ideals in two respects.

First, under Schumann's very influence, he had begun work on a symphonic composition of monumental proportions, only to realize soon that his imaginative impulses were too strongly tied to the idiom of the piano — in spite of Schumann's prophecy that "with the masses of orchestra and chorus at his disposal" . . . Brahms would "succeed in opening wondrous vistas." A creative crisis was at hand, and Brahms saw himself compelled to seek a firmer basis than the faithful exploration of either pianistic or symphonic styles in the wake of Beethoven's *oeuvre* could offer him: he would have ended up as an eclectic imitator of Classicism.

Second, although the time-honored forms of vocal polyphony intrigued him, he was drawn less to the "Nazarene" or "Caecilian" sound ideal of the Romantic but historically inaccurate concept of the *a cappella* sound than to the absolute equality of parts which provided him with an escape from chordally conceived pianistic writing and with novel means of design. And the fresh approach prompted an inquiry into the historic dimensions of the idealized Palestrina style: Brahms immersed himself in scholarly studies which led him to the "Old Netherland School," the several generations of Franco-Flemish composers. In conformance with the historiography of his time, he became involved in the "contrapuntal wizardry" of the "Netherlanders" and saw a new solution to the problems of form — a new blending of thematic invention, part-writing and structural planning. In contrast to Schumann, Mendelssohn, and numerous other contemporaries, the young Brahms was not interested in choral sound but in choral texture. To what extent this was initially based on mere speculation became evident when he attempted to put his choral studies to the test of actual performance. Misguided by the use of the countertenor register, he found himself unable to realize his choral essays with the modern chorus of mixed voices and had to write out alternate versions. His revisions of the *Marienlieder,* Op. 22 (with a change from women's chorus to mixed chorus), serves as an example.

A matter of particular fascination for him became his dealing with the phenomenon of the canon and its implied identity of parts — even linking soprano and bass to the same melodic line. "I now can write all manner of complicated canons," he stated in a letter to Clara Schumann with a measure of naive pride. Indeed, the canon plays an extraordinary role in Brahms's work, both in individual choral compositions and in his concept of form in general. The canonic technique appears often in his chamber music and orchestral writing, especially in transitions from recapitulation to coda where — unlike Beethoven — he prefers the tightest possible texture. Finally he took up the project — not too startling at the midway point of the nineteenth century — to set the entire Ordinary of the Mass in

canonic manner. The earliest portion of this Mass, the *Benedictus,* was later included in the well-known "Warum" motet of Op. 74. This *Canonic Mass* was believed lost until just a few years ago when a copy was accidentally discovered. Throughout his life, Brahms, the composer whose work took its point of departure from piano music and who was so clearly committed to the symphony and large chamber music forms, retained the habit of experimenting with new technical aspects of composition in works for which he chose the choral medium.

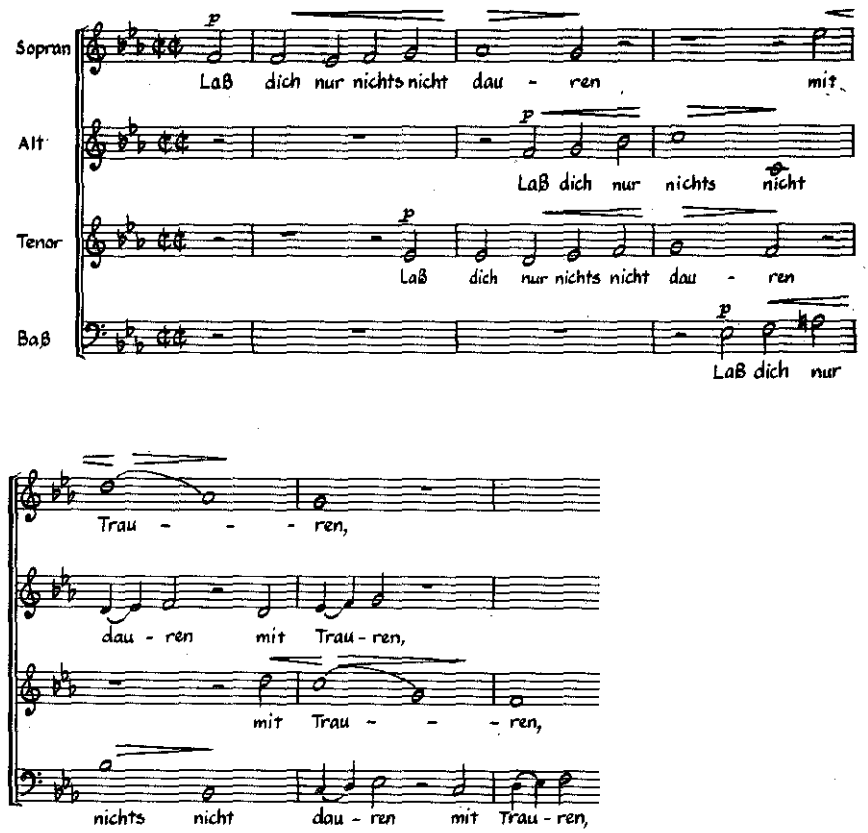
On the other hand, Brahms's first encounter with choral performance was of a more accidental nature. He had written three-part settings of folk songs for young ladies in Hamburg. While the original performance was of a purely private nature, the "three crows," as they called themselves, were soon joined by additional members of what became a women's chorus. For this group Brahms probably also wrote a sacred work based on Psalm 13 (Op. 27) whose eclectic and somewhat belabored style makes it one of his least interesting compositions. The second encounter was of a more professional kind. Clara Schumann had secured for him an annual three-months' appointment (September through November) in the small principality of Detmold. Aside from piano instruction for the princesses, his duties included some choral work — at first of rather modest dimensions but soon growing into commitments involving chorus and orchestra.

After the disastrous reception of the D-Minor Piano Concerto (Leipzig, January, 1859 — the work was originally planned as Brahms's First Symphony and marked the onset of the creative crisis) — and after the public performance of the First Serenade, Op. 11 (Hamburg, March, 1859), began that delightful socially inspired episode in Brahms's life to which we owe so many choral works. The Hamburg performance of a wedding motet was followed by the formal establishment of a women's chorus organized by the circle of ladies for whom Brahms had written his earlier folk-song arrangements. The statutes, couched in amusing quaint terms, were drafted by Brahms; and the chorus insignia lettering, "HFC" (an abbreviation for Hamburg Frauen-Chor), was grouped around a "B" (standing for Brahms). For detailed studies of this phase of Brahms's work we are indebted to the well-known American writer Sophie Drinker from whose collection Vernon Gotwals and Philip Kepler published twenty-eight folk-song settings.

The earliest chorus works published with opus numbers are the Sacred Song, Op. 30, and the first two pieces from Sacred Choruses

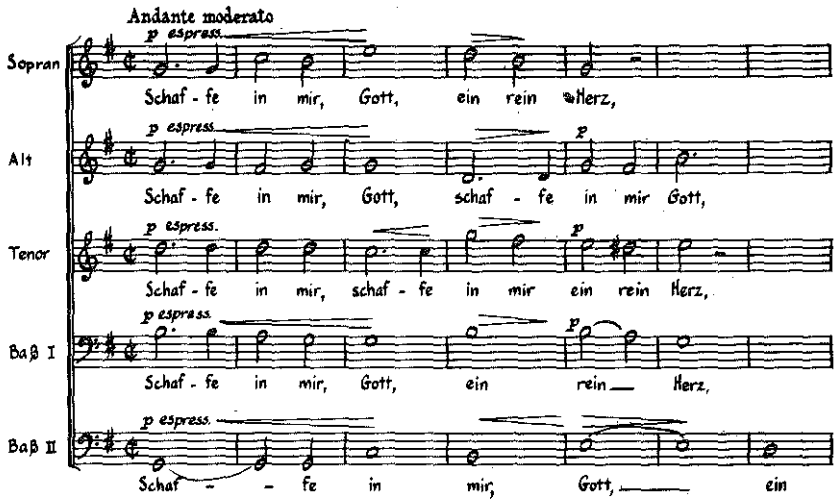
for Women's Voices, Op. 37. They exhibit quite clearly the characteristics of the studies written in 1856 and 1859. The Sacred Song consists of two double canons at the lower ninth (the beginning of the first is shown in Example 1) — the canon of soprano and alto in turn being taken up in a second stanza by tenor and bass — and it shows Brahms's predilection for closed forms: in a third stanza, the first of the two canons is resumed. In the other works Brahms's autographs even include — in conformance with Renaissance manuscripts — Latin inscriptions for the canonic techniques involved; for instance, "O bone Jesu," Op. 37, No. 1, is marked *Canone per arsin et thesin, et per motum contrarium,* designating canonic imitation in contrary motion and with the accented beat placed on the unaccented beat in the answering voice. Brahms, in general, favored the genre of the group canon in which paired voices are jointly treated in canonic imitation.

EXAMPLE 1



While these pieces are characterized by an evident lack of choral experience, the Motets, Op. 29, of 1860, though still strictly canonic, suggest a genuine creative breakthrough. Especially notable is the second work in the series, a setting of Psalm 51, whose outer parts are melodically identical, except that the soprano part, moving in halved note values, renders the melody of the bass part twice (see Ex. 2). What comes to the fore here is Brahms's complete mastery of the strictest form. It is interesting that he returned to this strictness in the *German Requiem* — and precisely at the point of the highest personal involvement: the fifth movement, which he added in memory of his mother. Only such intensity of design proved artistically suitable for his most subjective statements. It was no longer the historical experiment so much as the new approach to Romantic expression with which Brahms was concerned. Clara Schumann spontaneously recognized the significance of the Motet, Op. 29, No. 2. "It is the prize," she wrote to Brahms. She saw the decisive turning point, the achievement of a new texture; for canonic dependence gives way in the inner voices of this work to motivic elaboration of the outer voices, and Brahms's ideal of the equality of parts had attained a new interpretation.

EXAMPLE 2



Brahms's practical experience in Detmold, however, led also to the beginning of his writing for chorus and orchestra. An *Ave Maria* for women's voices and orchestra was his first choral work to appear in print (Op. 12); it brought him the same fee as the D-Minor Piano Concerto — from the present-day point of view the comparison

seems almost grotesque, for the *Ave Maria* seems so obviously indicative of the composer's uncertain probing. The same is true of the *Begräbnisgesang* (Funeral Anthem), Op. 13, for chorus and wind band. The work may be considered an unusual example of Brahms's conscious archaism, as is illustrated particularly through emphasized "false" word accents suggesting the casual text underlay of mensural music. Yet we are dealing here apparently with some of the origins of the *German Requiem:* It is not only the seven-fold design that links the two works but more specifically the scoring, for lower voices only, at the beginning or the thematic relationship that binds together the concepts of Death ("earth must return to earth") and Resurrection ("When the last trumpet shall sound").

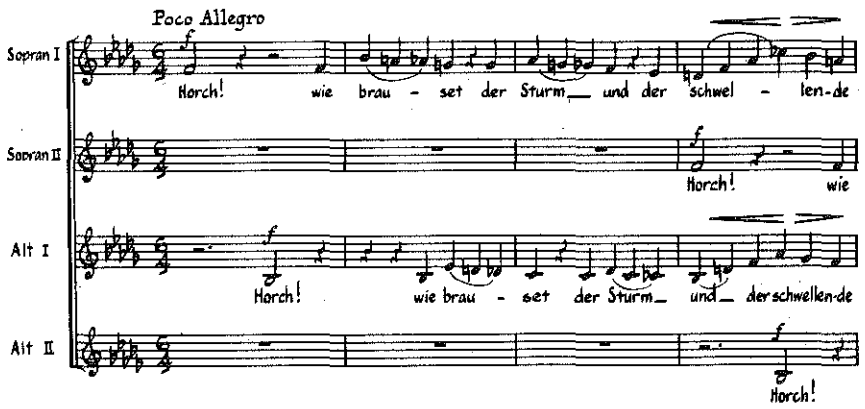
In the part-books that were written out for the Hamburg Women's Chorus, Brahms collected in addition to folk-song settings and arrangements of works by Schumann, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Haydn, and Zelter, samples from the music of Byrd, Caldara, Eccard, Hassler, Isaac, and Palestrina. It is in these part-books that we can trace, almost day by day, the genesis of the *Marienlieder.* Brahms's preference for the low alto register virtually ruled out performance of the original versions; Brahms was compelled to use tenors for the second alto part. In the end he rejected the emergency measure and rearranged the works, in view of their projected publication, for mixed chorus. He added, "written somewhat in the manner of old German folk songs and hymns," and his intentions are borne out by such madrigalisms as the ringing of bells ("Mary's Pilgrimage") and the sound of horns (No. 4). The disposition of keys suggests that Brahms thought of these part-songs in terms of a cycle.

By contrast, the twelve *Lieder und Romanzen,* marked with a relatively late opus number (44) and published with much delay (1866), retained their original scoring for women's voices as given in the part-books for the Hamburg Women's Chorus. Written at the time of Brahms's rather uncertain exploring of the means of choral-orchestral texture, the series shows a remarkably sovereign command of technique and expression. With sparse use of motivic work, Brahms is absolutely precise in rendering the complex structure of the text (e.g., in the "Love Song"); he develops the part-song to the choral *ballade* (e.g., in the fourth stanza of "The Bridegroom"); and with his austere melodic and economic, though invariably apt, harmonic language he renders even such a sentimental text as Ludwig Uhland's "The Nun" convincing to the modern listener. The lovely ease and singability of these pieces (special mention should be made of No. 7) is invariably paired with fine linear technique — which belies any categorizing of Brahms's choral style as purely Romantic and emotional. In fact, his linear technique in turn serves as

a means of expression, as for instance in the graphic description of the swaying trees ("Willows at the Brook," No. 9).

The tightest structure appears at the end — characteristic of Brahms's sense of form: unlike Beethoven, he tends towards final concentration rather than final brilliance. Writing a canon at the fifth with paired entrances presents no great problem of technique in itself; but to compose such a canon with the most sensitive observance of the mood of the text, down to the finest details of interpretation, is not only difficult but raises the technical to highest artistic mastery. The manner in which Brahms succeeded in applying the strict form of the canon to the text of Uhland's "Night in March" redeems many a heavy-handed lyricism in the works of his contemporaries (see Ex. 3).

EXAMPLE 3



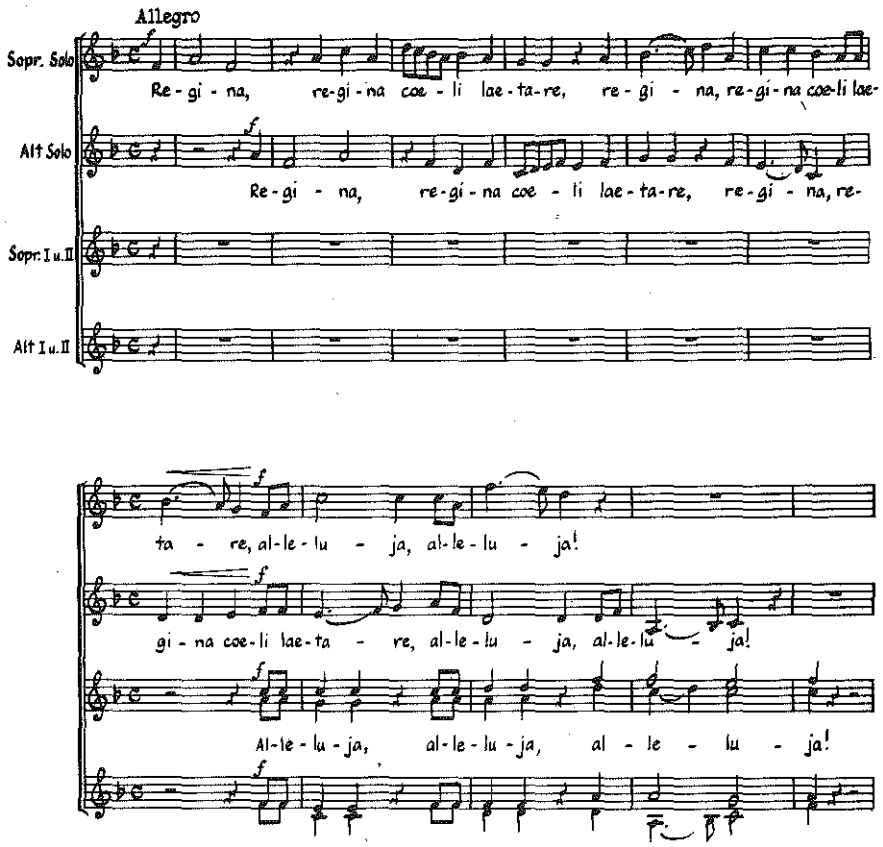
How clearly a newly-won phase of maturity stands out against the earlier — though only slightly earlier — phase of experimentation can be seen from the Songs for Women's Chorus, Op. 17, in the accompaniment of which Brahms pays tribute to the Romantic favoring of the sound of horns and harp. Never was his style closer to Schumann, or even to the gentle expressiveness of Mendelssohn (see especially "The Gardener"). Even his close associates observed this fact in critical comment on the works. "I cannot quite make friends with them . . . but the Fingal piece is magnificent," wrote Julius Otto Grimm, then music director in Göttingen, who was a close friend of Brahms. The last piece of the series, written slightly later, anticipates in effect the *Gesang der Parzen,* Op. 89. Its strict rhythmic pattern, symbolizing submission to an unavoidable fate and dominating the entire melodic and contrapuntal texture of the work, clearly places it outside the orbit of purely Romantic sound. It remains an extraordi-

nary fact that such an exemplary composition as the setting of Psalm 51 stands at the very beginning of Brahms's choral essays — a work marked by almost dreamlike expressive force (and more so than later works), its strict commitment to contrapuntal technique notwithstanding. In publishing Psalm 51, Brahms added a second motet, *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her,* composed in the sectional manner of the sixteenth-century motet. Each verse of the chorale is treated in fugal exposition carried through all voices; in order to avoid uniformity of structure, Brahms employs a motivically enriched texture beginning with the sixth verse while tightening the contrapuntal strictness. At the same time he preserves a certain unity by introducing the chorale tune by augmentation in the bass part at the end of each section. With their utter concentration of compositional means, the Motets, Op. 29, doubtless form the first high point in Brahms's choral *oeuvre.*

At the beginning of his Viennese period, Brahms encountered another women's chorus — in this case of professional caliber; and this gave Brahms the opportunity to resume the composition of canonic motets for equal voices. At that time he added a new work to his three Sacred Choruses, Op. 37. This, the later *Regina Coeli,* stands in obvious contrast to the somewhat pale character of the two pieces that preceded it. It is not only the alternation of solo voices and chorus that lends a new distinction to the work but the composer's structural command: While the solo voices introduce the text line by line in canonic contrary motion, the chorus enters in episodes which, in a predominantly homophonic texture, lend a caesura character to certain points of the formal design yet assume, with a final Hallelujah section, a more independent role in which motivic elements of the solo sections are further developed. The *Regina Coeli* assuredly represents the same level of creative quality as the Motets, Op. 29 (see Ex. 4).

The Five Songs for Men's Chorus, Op. 41, may have been composed in 1862 — in any event they did not, as has been suggested, originate in connection with the Austro-Prussian war of 1866. They seem quite isolated and, by comparison with the published works of this period, give the impression of an earlier style. The Three Songs for Mixed Chorus, Op. 42, too, are earlier than is implied by their opus number. Their six-part texture is representative of a special aspect of Brahms's choral writing: He divides the choral score into two pseudo-antiphonal groups (most clearly shown in "Darthula's Grabesgesang"), thus creating an effect of dialogue that is not found in the text. A similar tendency often causes problems in the texture of

EXAMPLE 4



his songs. Quite fascinating, however, is the manner in which he uses this technique in "Abendständchen": The rhythm of the quasi-recited melody and of the inner parts, which move in contrary motion, vividly renders the effect of a tranquil flute sound and the murmuring of a well in the night. Midway between these two pieces in time stands one of Brahms's most expansive and expressive works, based on the typically Romantic theme of the submerged city of Vineta whose fate is being compared to lost love. It is indicative of the changing appreciation of the extremes of Brahms's expression that "Vineta," once a favorite in the choral repertoire, has given way in popularity to works composed in a stricter style.

Op. 37, 41, 42, and 44 each contain older works. For a number of years Brahms wrote no more *a cappella* compositions. His interest turned to larger choral-orchestral works, as is evident from the nature of Op. 45, 50, 53, 54, and 55: His road led from strict choral writing through choral works with orchestra to the symphony. The crowding of the works just listed within relatively few publications and years

bears out a certain emancipation from the choral idiom which allowed the composer to face the new challenge of mastering the symphonic idiom. Yet his contributions to the choral-orchestral genre were by no means exhausted, and it is understandable that the origin of the works from these years is surrounded by a measure of speculation. There is, for instance, a "German Requiem" mentioned among Schumann's plans for new works. Though the *German Requiem* by Brahms is doubtless intimately connected with Schumann's fate, Brahms was likely not aware of Schumann's plan, nor can his work be considered simply a Requiem Mass written on a German text. The death of Schumann can, in fact, not be linked to Brahms's work in the sense of a memorial tribute, but we may speak of a deeper connection with Schumann's tragic end which so profoundly affected and changed Brahms. The youth who had long retained a high voice became more and more introverted as he matured, and the vision of the work that was taking shape in his mind was not that of a Funeral Mass — it was a hymn of consolation for "those who bear sorrow" yet must live on, for, as the twenty-eight-year-old formulated it, "Life deprives us of more than does Death."

As a second movement he added to the growing design of the work a piece that has its own tragic history. As we know, he had failed in the attempt of the large cyclic composition that was to be his First Symphony; in the end he had taken some refuge in the instrument he knew and had transformed the work that "refused to be born" into a piano concerto (the D-Minor Concerto, Op. 15) which, at its Leipzig performance in January, 1859, was promptly hissed off the stage. From the symphony, a scherzo — not suitable for the piano concerto version — had remained unused. Brahms grafted a chorale-like melody (as well as the text "for all flesh is like grass") onto the fragment — and it is striking what a somber, sarabande-like quality Brahms had chosen for the scherzo of his First Symphony. It is evident that basic traits of Brahms's artistic personality were involved.

The work thus undertaken was left unfinished for years — years that brought more bitter experiences. He had gone to Vienna hoping that successful appearances as conductor in this metropolis of European music might pave the way for an appointment as music director in his home town Hamburg. But the appointment of a young composer who had grown up in the Hamburg slums met with resistance, and the post was given to a singer — himself a highly distinguished and deserving candidate. Brahms now lost interest in his conducting career and resigned from his duties as choral conductor in Vienna. His decision was speeded by an unfavorable press campaign — his programs of classical choral literature had met with little understanding on the part of the Viennese public.

February, 1865, marked the grievous loss of his mother, and this caused Brahms to return to the abandoned plan of a work devoted to the themes of mourning and consolation. But, as was usual with Brahms, he needed distance of time before the personal experience could attain artistic expression. And it is characteristic of Brahms that he turned to the more impersonal choral medium rather than to the subjective expression of song.

Thus the *German Requiem* was not completed until 1866, and only parts of the work were presented to the Vienna public late in 1867. The concert hall in which the performance took place had no organ. But the large fugue Brahms had written on the text "The souls of the just who are safe in God's hand" contains an extended organ pedal point symbolizing the unfailing refuge found in divine protection, and Brahms had taken care to indicate that in performances for which no organ was available this pedal point should be sustained *pianissimo* in the timpani part. The percussionist for the Vienna performance misunderstood Brahms's direction and drowned the fugue in a tremolo of thirty-six measures — "as if a train had thundered through a tunnel," said one of the reviews. Thus Brahms placed his hopes in the first complete performance on Good Friday, 1868, in the Bremen Cathedral. At the last minute Clara Schumann arranged that she, whose absence ever since Schumann's death had "deprived him of more than does Death," could hear with him the great work whose origin was so closely connected with the two persons who had affected his artistic life most deeply: his mother and Robert Schumann.

Yet even this premiere performance was not spared some difficulties. The cathedral consistory had not understood the genuinely Christian essence of the work — its message of consolation, trust, and submission for "all that bear sorrow." They missed a direct reference to the Redemption and gave their permission for a church performance on Good Friday only under the condition that the *Messiah* aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth" be inserted in the middle of the work. Thus a poor performance tradition was started, partly because the soprano aria was considered an important enrichment of the total pattern of registers, though there was no obvious need to interpolate the Handel aria when the work was not given in church. After experiencing the further makeshift solution of including Agathe's aria from *Der Freischütz* ("Wie nahte mir der Schlummer"), Brahms resolved to add a movement of his own. Thus it is to this somewhat grotesque sequence of events that we owe a part of the work which — though not imposing and not particularly

representative of its specific oratorio style — is its most heartfelt. Now, three years after his mother's death, Brahms was also able to set a text of very direct meaning: "As a mother gives solace." But beyond the fact that the text moves on two distinct levels (soprano solo, "And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice" — St. John 16:22; and chorus, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you" — Isaiah 66:13), this addition is above all a revelation of Brahms's artistic personality. It was precisely this tender prophecy that Brahms cast in the strictest musical form: melody and bass (the latter in rhythmic augmentation) are melodically identical. The prophecies of consolation and reunion are not only contrapuntally joined; for Brahms they become one. It is typical of his nature that he needed years to arrive at a creative expression of this message, and only in a technically most uncompromising manner.

The *Alto Rhapsody* stands close to the *German Requiem* — not only from the point of view of opus numbers but because its connection with Robert Schumann's tragic death. There is no doubt that, after Schumann's suicide, Brahms had felt more and more drawn to Clara Schumann — at first in shy devotion, and eventually in passionate love. Yet either because of the illusion of continuing human ties between Robert and Clara Schumann or because of that of disloyalty towards a revered friend, he turned away from Clara abruptly. Thus hers was a double loss — she was robbed of both husband and friend — and he underwent a total change: What now came into existence was the gloomy and grim image of Brahms, the figure whom the Viennese writer Daniel Spitzer described with the wicked *bon mot* that his most carefree song was "the grave is my joy."

Years later, he imagined his great love for Clara Schumann reborn when Julie, the second Schumann daughter was grown. In his involved written language, which vaguely suggested or veritably passed over the actual message, he asked Clara for Julie's hand. The letter, however, also contained a totally different and unfortunate message — a message from the artist who had always hated public performance, but directed to an artist totally devoted to the ideal of performance: Brahms suggested to Clara Schumann that she abandon public appearances. Quite understandably she took offense to the well-intentioned but ill-conceived advice, and the marriage proposal received no word of answer. Caught in this predicament, Brahms came across a Goethe fragment describing the poet's visit with a young man who, under the impact of reading *Werther,* had "turned passion into the hatred of man" and had forsaken the world

of love. To him Goethe addressed the moving verse: "If, Father of Love, your psaltery has but one tone perceptible to his ear, let it give comfort to him." Brahms decided to set this text to music and made it a work of his most personal expression — the *Alto Rhapsody,* Op. 53.

Meanwhile Julie had become engaged to an Italian nobleman. Brahms declined an invitation to participate in a small historical play planned for the celebration in a manner that — even for him — was unusually brusque. In the end, the celebration had to be postponed for several weeks because of a death in the family. All this time Brahms had kept the *Alto Rhapsody* manuscript secret from Clara — only to present it to her on the evening after the event with the words " . . . and this is my wedding anthem." Clara Schumann, deeply touched, began to sense the new tragedy that had unfolded between Brahms and the Schumann family. Henceforth Brahms, increasingly curt and bitter, tended to speak of himself as the *Abseiter* ("the recluse" — referring to the beginning of the *Alto Rhapsody* text), at the same time, however, turning his irony onto the work that exposed more of his inner being than the rationale of artistic creation would normally admit. In its public performances — and it became one of the most widely performed works of Brahms — he avoided it as much as possible.

Included in the group of choral-orchestral works that mark the emancipation process leading to Brahms's purely symphonic writing are two pieces of patently lesser value. One of them, *Rinaldo,* a cantata for men's chorus, was written at the occasion of a choral competition (which another candidate promptly won). The work actually bears out the point that Brahms, with his predilection for closed forms, was not at home in the dramatic medium: One cannot, in the interest of balanced structure, repeat portions of music (and text) and thus let the protagonist restate as intention what meanwhile has become accomplished action. The second work *(Triumphlied)* was a typical reflection of the national vogue of excitement — shared by many of Brahms's contemporaries — at the re-establishment of the German empire. Its all-too-obvious Handelian strains had given rise to Wagner's caustic comment, and Brahms himself was eventually embarrassed at this tribute to the German *Zeitgeist* — he fashioned for it the derogatory epithet *"Kaiserschmarrn".**

*The designation represents a double pun: "Schmarren" is the word for a Viennese pancake made with lard, i.e., *Schmalz* (the *Kaiserschmarren* being a special variety), but it also serves for a hackneyed piece of music — in this case a "hackneyed piece of music for the Emperor." The omission of the letter *e* in the last syllable adds a colloquial touch to the self-deprecating expression.

Conversely, the *Schicksalslied,* Op. 54, is a remarkable achievement of choral writing — a work that is deeply moving, though its ending presented Brahms with unexpected problems of conception. The tragic denial of all hope that forms the conclusion of Hölderlin's poem proved so fundamentally incompatible with the composer's Lutheran faith that he had given thought to having the chorus repeat the opening "Ye that dwell in eternal light" at the end without text — merely humming — thus turning Hölderlin's classical interpretation of fate into a Christian interpretation. (It serves as a reminder of the utter senselessness of the Bremen objections to Brahms's lack of religious spirit). In the end, Brahms rejected this aesthetically somewhat unsatisfactory solution and limited the reprise to a repeat of the orchestral introduction, which, nevertheless, suggests a return to the text dealing with the eternally blessed.

The evolution of Brahms's *a cappella* style guided him from the motet-like and madrigal-like early compositions fully into the domain of the Romantic part song. Less occupied with the choral medium in this phase of his creative career, Brahms turned at first to duets (Op. 20, 28, 61, 66, 75), works that belong essentially to the song literature, except that their lyricism is subjected to Brahms's predilection for the texture of dialogue, which had prompted him to set the texts in the form of duet rather than solo song in the first place.

Only later does his interest in the vocal quartet become discernible (Op. 31, 52, 64, 65, 92, 103, 112). Again we are dealing with works that represent song literature rather than choral literature, though the borderline between the two genres remains flexible: The *Liebeslieder* Waltzes, Op. 52 and 65, inspired by the students of the great *Lieder* interpreter Julius Stockhausen, are customarily sung by choruses. In fact, Brahms subsequently changed the piano accompaniment for some of them to an orchestral one, thus suggesting choral performance. These delightful works, ranging from the humorous song to the *ballade,* show Brahms's devotion to the style of the waltz and give witness to some of his happiest creative moments. Yet even this collection ends with a *passacaglia* based on the "chorale" from the *Alto Rhapsody,* pointing back to the most dire experiences in the composer's life.

Between the Duets Op. 61 and 66 and the Quartets Op. 64 and 65 *(Neue Liebeslieder)* Brahms published a new, and rather uneven, collection of part songs (Op. 62) which, though chorally conceived, approach the nature of song more directly than any of the others. Never did Brahms come as close to the genuine folk song as he did in

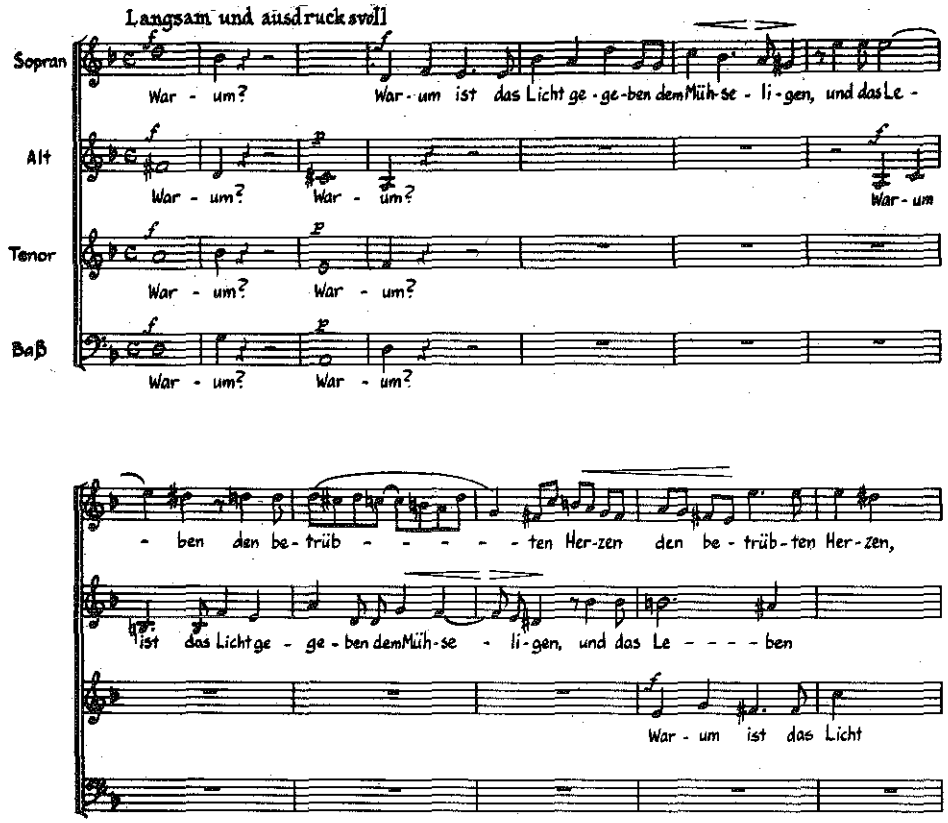
"Rosmarin". With unfailing precision he follows the structure of the text in "Waldesnacht" (the first of the "Fountain of Youth" songs) while he nevertheless retains the folk-song quality. One of the most magnificent examples of Brahms's lyricism, it is a work of most intimate expression of mood and far removed from the sentimentality that marked the choral part song of the second half of the nineteenth century. Brahms invariably forestalls emotional excess by his strict and rational sense of form.

In the summer of 1878, which he spent in Pörtschach, Austria, working on his Second Symphony and his Violin Concerto, Brahms also wrote a work in which he tried to extend the expressive quality of his lyrical choral music to the sacred motet. What resulted is probably his greatest choral work, the "Warum" Motet, Op. 74, No. 1. The theme of the first movement is so perfectly merged with the text that it gives the impression of the spoken word: the melodic accents are the accents of prosody (even when they occur against the metric accent pattern). The delusive light that shines on "those who are burdened" is symbolized by a diminished fifth which, in its inversion as augmented fourth, was known in traditional music theory as the erratic *diabolus in musica.* And the troublesome life of those that toil in hardship is expressed by crowded descending intervals and faltering rhythm.

Only when one realizes that this highly allusive language is applied to theme and countersubject of a fugal exposition, does it become clear to what extent Brahms blends Romantic emotion with formal design (see Ex. 5). A further phenomenon is the imperceptible link to the early studies, for the second movement is the *Benedictus* from the *Canonic Mass* — as mentioned above, the only extant portion of the earlier work, which the composer fitted into the motet with a new text. Understandably though regrettably, the second motet, a set of five chorale variations with a concluding canonic *Amen* — also from earlier studies — stands in the shadow of the magnificent "Warum" motet.

It is interesting that, after the contrapuntal works for chorus and after the choral-orchestral works around Op. 50 that mark the road to the symphony, Brahms returned to choral writing at the time of his Fourth Symphony and its new stylistic orientation. Thus Brahms, late in life, confirmed his habit of initiating new phases in his creative career by resuming the choral technique. The first fruits of this return are the six *Lieder und Romanzen,* Op. 93[a], which suggest the austerity and resignation of his late style. (A brief occasional work, not related to this series in style and texture, was published as the *Tafellied* — "drinking song" — Op. 93[b].) The first two pieces in the set are

EXAMPLE 5



remarkable for their motivic concentration. "Das Mädchen" is a work based on a single motif; it reappears conspicuously as the beginning of the solo songs, Op. 95. Between the two series stand the Op. 94 songs which are related to the choral works by their utter resignedness; with Op. 95 the last period in Brahms's life work has begun. It is no longer the identity of melody and bass that marks his work, as in early compositions, but an identity of thematic and formal structure. Brahms's great art lies in his adapting the thematic development to the development of the text structure. His style begins to defy scrupulous formal analysis. At this point one can begin to speak of the Brahmsian technique that Schönberg described as "developing variation" and that was clearly taken up by the Second Viennese School. At first, the thematic structure admitted only brief forms. In his Fourth Symphony and in his late piano works and the clarinet sonatas, Brahms extended the process to the limits of tonal structure.

Less successful was a further experiment with new formal means; namely, the attempt to unify a larger work structurally by a constant

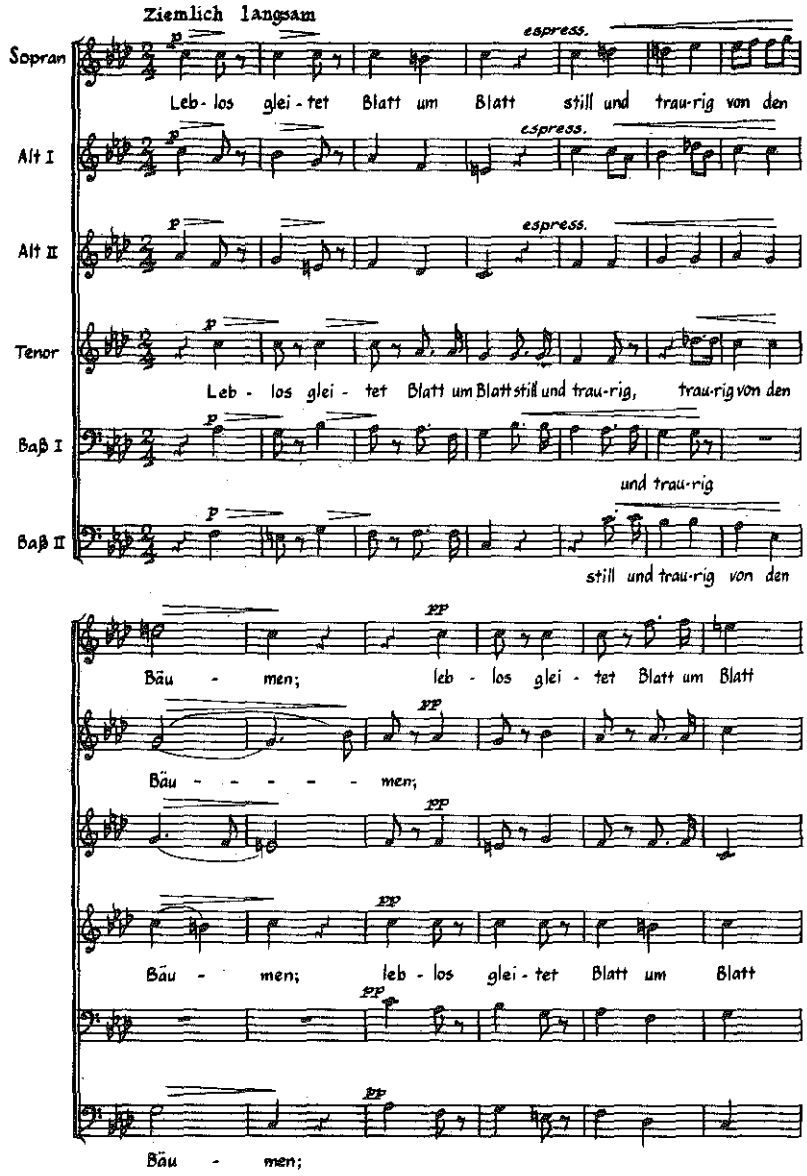
rhythmic pattern in order to symbolize the inexorable force of fate. Schumann had probed similar means in his cyclic works though without being caught in a web of rhythmic monotony. The *Gesang der Parzen,* Op. 89, with which we are here concerned, was at its time one of the most heavily debated works of Brahms. The reason, however, was not only its unswerving rhythm but its strophic structure. Brahms had included the last stanza which guides the lyric poem back to Goethe's *Iphigenia* drama and thus runs counter to the innate musical lyricism of the work; and he changed the melodic pattern of one of the stanzas (turning to a more contemplative interpretation of fate) to the major mode. Rather than intensifying the over-all effect, this change — according to its initial audience reaction — seemed to have weakened it.

By contrast, the companion piece to the *Gesang der Parzen – Nänie,* Op. 82, a dirge written in memory of Brahms's friend, the Romantic painter Anselm Feuerbach, whose strict formal designs and clear representational architecture must have captivated Brahms's interest — proved to be a highly successful work. Undeniably, Brahms had taken his *Schicksalslied,* Op. 54, as a model; yet the tighter motivic and contrapuntal structure reflect the distance of ten years and the beginning of Brahms's late style. The work deals in three large sections with the finality of death — even of the death of beauty — and it leads, in the lamentation of Thetis for her son Achilles, to one of Brahms's noblest and most eloquent melodic inventions. Once again, Brahms did not rest content with the poetic ending; as in the *Schicksalslied,* he devised a conclusion drawn from the beginning of the work.

Like the Op. 94 solo songs, the Five Choruses, Op. 104, seem united by their mood of depression. Each of the works in this series would require its own analysis as to the unification of text and music. Only the most intense study can reveal the linear and harmonic means with which these laments render the sense of the poetry and rise to their own searching expression. They stand alone at the height of Brahms's choral *oeuvre* — yet it is a height that tends to make one shudder. The subjectivity of Romantic expressiveness gives way to the acceptance of the end — the end of the composer's life and of the Classic-Romantic tradition in music. "Letztes Glück," the last of the pieces is — according to the Brahms biographer Max Kahlbeck (who supplied the text) — one of Brahms's most willful works. It may be called a song without melody — or with a melody that is hardly even in evidence since it is disguised and covered by constant change. In reality, its three essentially simple segments are present throughout,

but they move from part to part. From beginning to end, the work's structure expresses the somber, autumnal mood: "Leaf by leaf the foliage falls" (see Ex. 6).

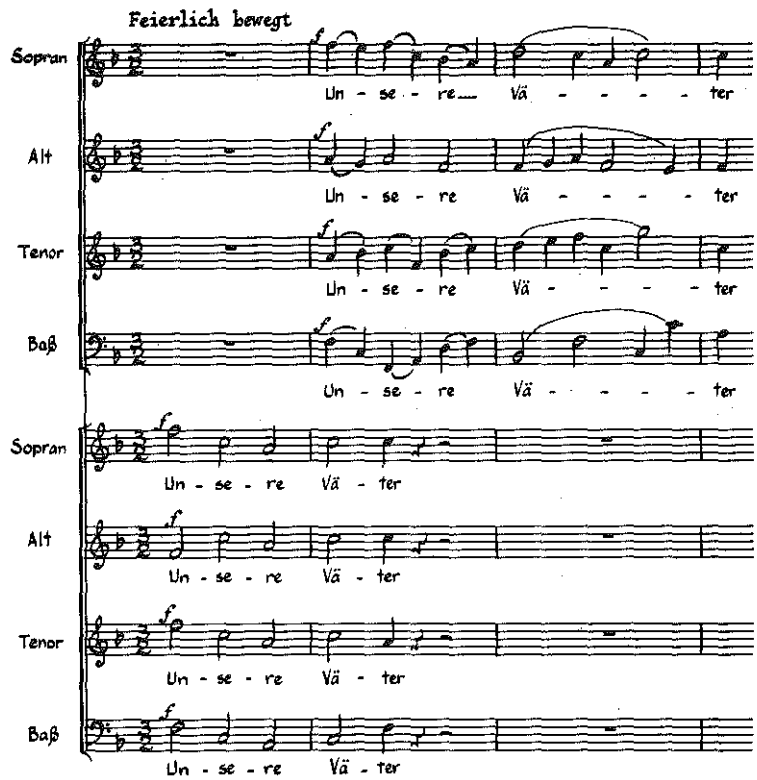
EXAMPLE 6



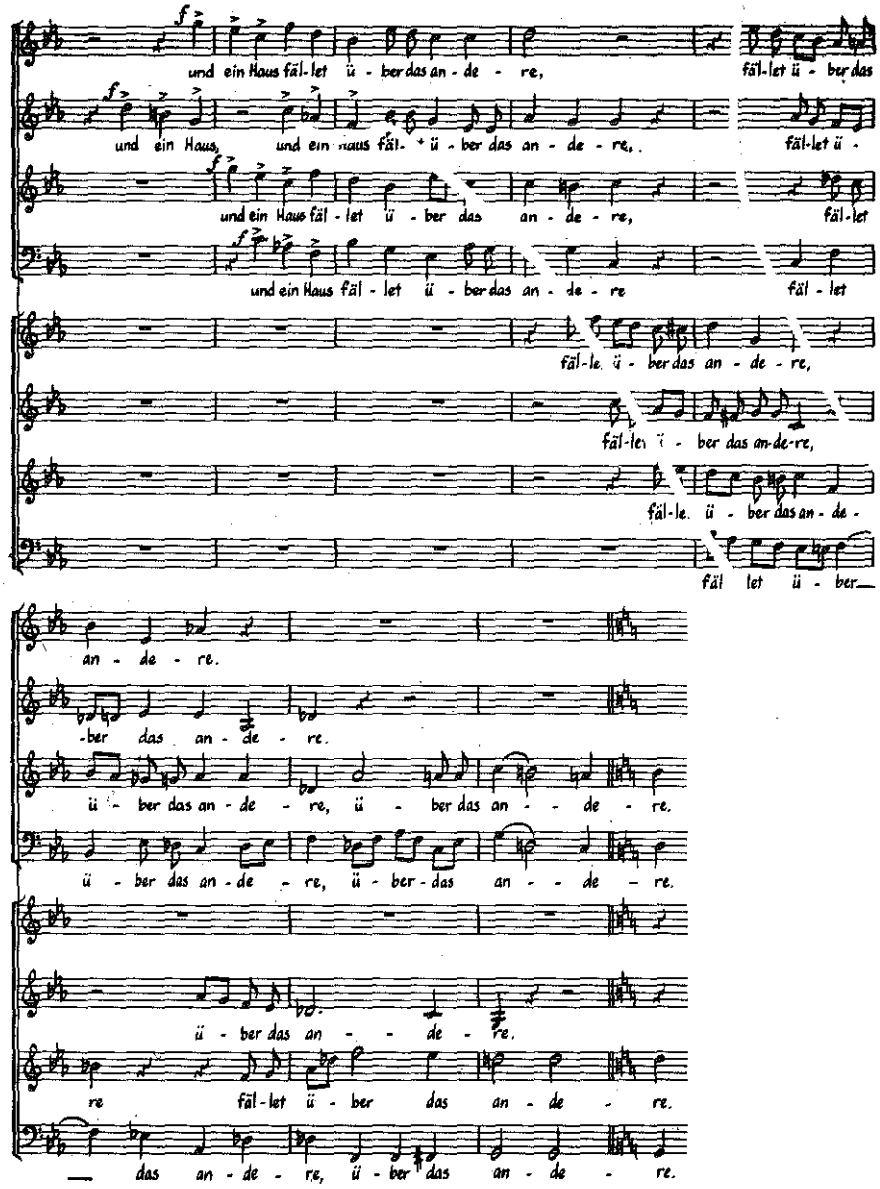
Just as Brahms's work had moved from the resignation of the Op. 94 songs to the Op. 95 songs and a new technique had developed from choral writing, it moved from Op. 104 and its outer limits of Romantic choral expression to new horizons in the six Motets, Op. 109 and 110 — his last choral works. A novel approach is announced

through the very use of antiphonal technique. The two separate titles for Op. 109 and 110 notwithstanding. Brahms considered the six motets a single series. In fact, he had compiled the biblical texts much earlier in connection with the Motet, Op. 74, No. 1. The extreme expressiveness of the earlier work appears in a more objective light in the later works, though it is by no means renounced. Brahms explored the range of antiphonal means with thoroughness and thus arrived at a new stage of formal and thematic concentration. In the first piece of *Fest- und Gedenksprüche* (Op. 109), Chorus I, entering after Chorus II, takes up the thematic material in embellished form (Ex. 7[a]); in other instances the imitation between Chorus I and Chorus II is exact. At times the antiphonal writing also adopts a division — typical for Brahms's writing — into high and low voices. In the second piece of the series the antiphonal writing favors echo effects, the middle section being given to close imitation in interpretation of the text — "one house falls upon the other" — (Ex. 7[b]). In the last of the three pieces, the antiphonal imitation is so densely fashioned that a constant eight-part texture arises; at the same time the motivic work is intensified in the manner of the first piece, except that in this case one chorus acts as harmonic support whereas the other presents melodic figuration in canon form.

EXAMPLE 7[a]

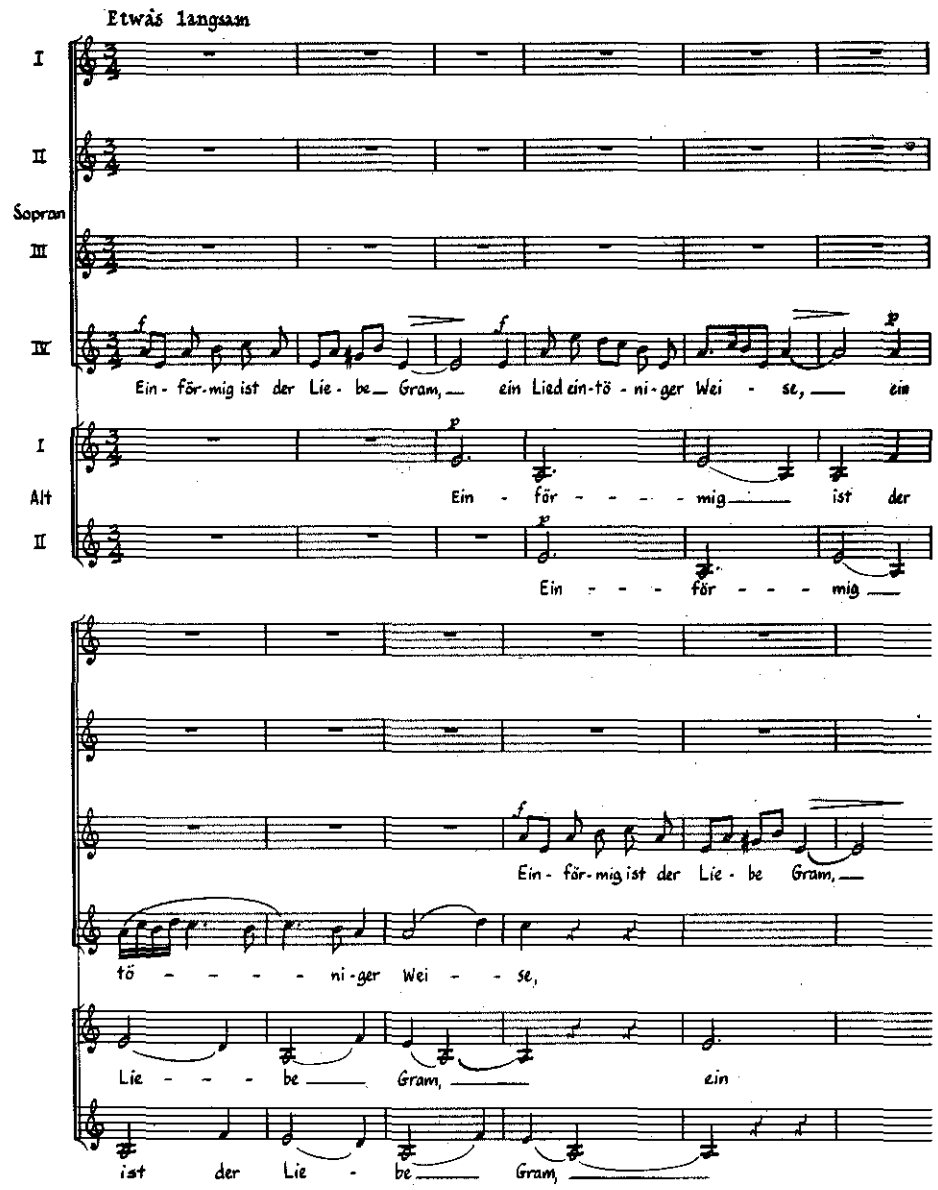


EXAMPLE 7b



Two of the motets from Op. 110 are based on the strict meter of the poetry and thus represent a type of *Liedmotette*. In line with Brahms's sense of cyclic form, the last motet occupied the most exposed position in the total set of six. And indeed the work is marked by a degree of motivic concentration that goes beyond that of all others; it suggests Brahms's technique in the Fourth Symphony and the subsequent works of his last period. This final phase, then, is

EXAMPLE 8



once again ushered in by choral writing, especially by Op. 93ª, No. 2, and by the last of his six motets (Op. 110, No. 3).

After this, Brahms published only an additional collection of canons, (Op. 113), apparently drawn for the most part from his early canon studies. It was his hope that they might have the same encouraging effect upon the practice of singing in the home as his vocal quartets had shown. The last of them ("Einförmig ist der Liebe

Gram") once more claims a special place within the total series. Its first melodic phrase is derived from the song "Der Leiermann" in Schubert's *Winterreise,* and the texture of the entire work is based on the pattern of the famous *Sumer Canon* from the thirteenth century (Ex. 8).

There could be no stronger avowal of Brahms's aesthetic aim for his choral music: a synthesis of Romantic expression and strictest polyphonic tradition.

Choral Works of Brahms
A Chronological List

The dates (in some cases not fully documented) are those of composition; as is evident from the sequence of opus numbers, the order of publication does not necessarily correspond to this original chronology.

Opus Number	Title	Date of Composition
12	*Ave Maria*	1858
13	*Begräbnisgesang* (Funeral Anthem)	1858
17	Four Songs for Women's Chorus	1860
22	*Marienlieder* (Songs of the Virgin Mary)	1859
27	Psalm 13	1859
29	Two Motets	1860
30	*Geistliches Lied* (Sacred Song)	1856
31	Three Quartets	1863
37	*Geistliche Chöre* (Sacred Choruses)	1863
41	Five Songs for Men's Chorus	1862
42	Three Songs for Mixed Chorus	1861
44	Twelve *Lieder und Romanzen* (Songs and Romances)	1863
45	*A German Requiem*	1868
50	*Rinaldo*	1868
52	*Liebeslieder* (Songs of Love) Waltzes	1869
53	*Alto Rhapsody*	1869
54	*Schicksalslied* (Song of Destiny)	1871
55	*Triumphlied* (Song of Triumph)	1871
62	Seven Songs for Mixed Chorus	1874
64	Three Quartets	1874
65	*Neue Liebeslieder* (New Songs of Love)	1874
74	Two Motets	1877
82	*Nänie*	1881
89	*Gesang der Parzen* (Song of the Fates)	1882
92	Four Quartets	1884
93[a]	Six *Lieder und Romanzen* (Songs and Romances)	1884
93[b]	*Tafellied* (Drinking Song)	1884
103	*Zigeunerlieder* (Gypsy Songs)	1889

104	Five Choruses	1888
109	*Fest- und Gedenksprüche* (Festival and Commemorative Pieces)	1888
110	Three Motets	1889
112	Six Quartets	1891
113	Thirteen Canons	1893

Topical Index
Listing by Work Categories

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Opus Number

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22 *Marienlieder* (Songs of the Virgin Mary), 6, 10
29 Two Motets, 9, 12
42 Three Songs, 12, 13
62 Seven Songs, 18, 19
74 Two Motets, 7, 19, 23
93[a] Six *Lieder und Romanzen* (Songs and Romances), 19-20, 25
104 Five Choruses, 21-22
109 *Fest- und Gedenksprüche* (Festival and Commemorative Pieces), 22-23
110 Three Motets, 22-25

Women's Chorus

37 *Geistliche Chöre* (Sacred Choruses), 8, 12, 13
44 Twelve *Lieder und Romanzen* (Songs and Romances), 10, 13
113 Thirteen Canons, 25-26

Men's Chorus

41 Five Songs, 12, 13

Part Songs with Piano

31 Three Quartets, 18
52 *Liebeslieder* (Songs of Love) Waltzes, 18
64 Three Quartets, 18
65 *Neue Liebeslieder* (New Songs of Love), 18
92 Four Quartets, 18
93[b] *Tafellied* (Drinking Song), 19
103 *Zigeunerlieder* (Gypsy Songs), 18
112 Six Quartets, 18

Works with Piano or Organ

27 Psalm Thirteen, 7
30 *Geistliches Lied* (Sacred Song), 7
(See also Op. 12, below)

Works with Instrumental Ensemble

13 *Begräbnisgesang* (Funeral Anthem), 10
17 Four Songs for Women's Chorus, 11

Works with Orchestra

12 *Ave Maria,* (also with organ), 9, 10
45 *A German Requiem,* 10, 13, 14-16
50 *Rinaldo,* 13, 17, 19
53 *Alto Rhapsody,* 13, 16-17
54 *Schicksalslied* (Song of Destiny), 13, 18, 21
55 *Triumphlied* (Song of Triumph), 17
82 *Nänie,* 21
89 *Gesang der Parzen* (Song of the Fates), 11, 21

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