

Song of Destiny (Schicksalslied)

Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

Brahms's *German Requiem*, which he completed in 1868, was immediately recognised as a great masterpiece; nevertheless it drew considerable criticism for its absence of any reference to the meaning of the Resurrection and man's redemption through the death of Christ. Brahms had made clear his intention to write a Requiem that was a comfort to the living rather than an act of prayer for the dead, but his great friend Dvořák spoke for many when he observed, '*Such a great man, such a great soul, but he believes in nothing*'.

Comments such as this did not do justice to Brahms, who was a deeply serious thinker, a philosopher even, with an intimate knowledge of the Scriptures. His agnosticism sprang not from an absence of belief but from an awareness that the religious certainties of past centuries no longer applied, and a conviction that in order to find some meaning in life man needed first of all to draw on his own inner humanity.

Brahms wrote the *Song of Destiny* in 1871. By now his humanistic agnosticism had become so much an integral part of him that his musical response to Hölderlin's text seems to be at variance with the poem's dark message. He was clearly aware of this contradiction when he wrote to a friend, '*I am saying something the poet does not say*'. Whereas Hölderlin contrasts the everlasting bliss of souls in heaven with the pain and suffering of human existence, ending on a note of bleak resignation, Brahms concludes the work with a return to the heavenly radiance of the orchestral introduction. As with the *Requiem*, his message seems to be that hope and consolation for the living may be found here on earth.

programme notes by John Bawden

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