

Nantwich Choral Society

21st Anniversary Season

BRAHMS

A German Requiem

BEETHOVEN

Symphony No 4 in B Flat



SATURDAY 26th MARCH 1994

**The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30pm.**

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA

(Leader: David Routledge)

Catrin Ley, *soprano*

Philip Ravenscroft, *baritone*

Conducted by
Stephen Buckman



BEETHOVEN - SYMPHONY NO 4 IN B FLAT

By the end of 1805, Beethoven had completed the first two movements of the C minor symphony that was to become his fifth, but he could not see how to proceed with it. While he was wrestling with ideas for the scherzo and finale of that symphony, he composed a completely new one, the Fourth Symphony in B flat, apparently in a single burst of activity since no sketches for it survive.

The Symphony's long dark introduction gradually builds in intensity until it breaks into the joyful light of the first movement's main Allegro (an idea which later provided Beethoven with the key to finishing the Fifth Symphony) which is full of contrasts between bucolic woodwind melodies and exuberant rhythmic outbursts from the full orchestra.

The principal theme of the slow movement, played initially by the first violins, is the serene cantilena that becomes more decorated at each reappearance, while the passionately restrained second theme (heard only twice) is one of the most beautiful melodies ever given to the clarinet.

The third movement, which Beethoven still calls a minuet, is really a lively scherzo, whose strongly syncopated rhythms give it seemingly unstoppable drive, until a brash fanfare from the horns cuts it short.

The finale is a bubbling moto perpetuo full of Beethoven's "unbuttoned" sense of humour - not subtle wit, but good honest fun!

INTERVAL

BRAHMS - A GERMAN REQUIEM

1. Blessed are they that mourn
2. All flesh doth perish as the grass
3. Lord, let me know mine end
4. How lovely are thy dwellings
5. Ye now have sorrow
6. For we have here no abiding city
7. Blessed are the dead

Brahms' only large-scale work for chorus and orchestra occupied him for over four years during his early thirties, between 1863-67. There seems not to have been any specific impetus behind its composition although the death of his mother in 1865 gave him a personal focus for the work he had been doing.

Brahms was not an orthodox follower of any religion - although he was a very religious person - and his **GERMAN REQUIEM** has nothing in common with the Latin mass for the dead. Instead he carefully chose passages from the Lutheran Bible (which he read daily) which emphasises comfort for the bereaved rather than for the departed. Significantly, Brahms did not include any mention of Christ in his chosen texts, intending the work's message to be universal and not tied to any specifically Christian doctrine: indeed, he later said that he could happily have left the word "German" out of the title and replaced it with the word "Human". For the first performance of the Requiem in Bremen in 1868, however (at which stage the present fifth movement did not exist), the conductor persuaded Brahms to allow the aria "I know that my redeemer liveth" from **Messiah** to be included, thus "rectifying" the doctrinal omission.

Despite Brahms' avowedly humanist beliefs, it is the spirit of the Lutheran Church which lies at the heart of the Requiem - in the music as much as in the words. Bach and Schutz are never very far away and Handel (who at least began life as a Lutheran) inspires the fugal sections; but it is the Lutheran chorale which seems to give shape to every melody and thus to unify the whole work.

Structurally, too, the Requiem has a symmetry and emotional balance which belie the rather haphazard process of its composition. At the centre stands a gentle and lyrical vision of Heaven ("How lovely are thy dwellings"); and on either side of this are two movements for soloists (baritone in No 3 and soprano in No 5) and chorus. In No 3, the baritone's expressions of anxious humility before God are echoed by the chorus while in No 5 (the movement which was added after the first performance), the soprano's words are underlined by the chorus's refrain of "Thee will I comfort, as one whom his mother comforts". It seems almost impossible that with such beautiful music, Brahms did not intend the soprano to represent the soul of his own mother.

The second and sixth movements are both extended choruses in several sections and their perspective is universal rather than personal, being concerned respectively with man's mortality and the resurrection to come. In both movements darkness and fear are replaced by radiant confidence in praise of God - a feeling of moving upwards into the light which is evident throughout the work. These two highly dramatic movements are framed by the two meditative outer choruses which propose the theme of the whole work (No 1 "Blessed are they that mourn") and offer a final parallel (No 7 "Blessed are the dead"): the circle is completed and "blessed" is the last word we hear, as it was the first.

Colin Bromelow