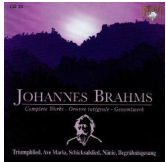


Brahms – Triumphlied, Schicksalslied, Nänie (Albrecht) [2004]



Triumphlied, Op. 55 - For 8-Part Chorus & Orchestra 1 *Lebhaft Und Feierlich - Animato* 7:25
2 *Mässig Belebt - Lebhaft - Ziemlich Langsam, Doch Nicht Schleppend* 6:31 3 *Lebhaft -
Etwas Lebhafter - Feierlich* 8:22 - 4 *Ave Maria, Op. 12 (Andante)* 3:46 5 *Schicksalslied,
Op. 54: Langsam Und Sehnsuchtsvoll - Allegro - Adagio* 14:46 6 *Nänie Op. 82: Andante - Più
Sostenuto - Tempo I* 13:20 7 *Begräbnisgesang Op. 13*
Bo Skovhus - baritone Dresdner Philharmonie Choir, Ernst-Senff-Chor Berlin Dresdner
Philharmonie Orchestra Gerd Albrecht – conductor

In a review contemporaneous to this I wrote that the greatest composers wrote the greatest music ... even if some of it is only rarely in the public domain. The greatness of the choral works of Johannes Brahms only serves to reinforce my viewpoint. Choral music, as illustrated by the minute number of concert performances and the frequent deletions from the CD catalogue, remains unfashionable and has been so for several decades. This is a terrible shame as Brahms's choral compositions are remarkable music and are for the most part unknown to the average listener leaving a considerable treasure trove of precious gems to be unearthed. The ever enterprising Chandos label is to be heartily congratulated on braving the obvious commercial constraints and releasing a cycle of Brahms's choral works of which by my reckoning this is the fifth in the series.

Throughout Brahms's career choral works, both sacred and secular, were extremely popular. In 1859 he co-formed and became director of the Hamburger Frauenchor (an association which was active until 1862) a women's choir numbering some forty voices. This experience undoubtedly stimulated Brahms to write for choral forces which he continued to do productively for the rest of his life.

The first work on this superb new Chandos release is the rare and wonderful Triumphlied (Song

of Triumph) for eight-part chorus, baritone solo and orchestra which Brahms set with miscellaneous biblical texts taken from The Revelation of St. John, chapter 19. Brahms composed this three movement thanksgiving cantata, patriotic to his Motherland, in 1870-71 to celebrate the Imperial German army's victories in the Franco-Prussian war and the humiliation of France. It was received with great acclaim and numerous performances. The intention behind Brahms's outpouring of nationalism, bordering on extreme jingoism, is perhaps difficult to understand today. But at the time of its composition Brahms was only reflecting his Empire's mood of intense pride and total relief associated with the victories of warfare. It was also a celebration of the new German Empire's recently crowned monarch, the work's dedicatee Emperor Wilhelm I, and the celebrated war leader and politician the Imperial 'Iron' Chancellor, Bismarck. For these reasons it is not surprising that performances outside Imperial Germany immediately ceased after the start of the Great War. Since the end of World War Two the work also quickly lost its popularity in Germany. However if I ever have any doubts about Brahms being a very great composer I listen to the Triumphlied (Song of Triumph) together with the cantata Rinaldo op. 50 and any misgivings are immediately dispelled.

The Triumphlied for reasons discussed above, is certainly the least known of Brahms's major choral compositions but few who have once heard the work will fail to become admirers. Described as "glorious" by J.A. Fuller-Maitland, "wonderful" by Donald Tovey and by biographer Florence May as having, "a power, a vividness, a picturesque strength, that are not transcended, even if they are equalled, by anything ever composed in the domain of choral music for the church or the concert room." Praise indeed!

There are only a handful of versions of the Triumphlied in the catalogues of which I would single out the fine performance from the Ernst-Senff Choir Berlin, Dresdner Philharmonie under Michel Plasson which is available as part of a five disc set on EMI Classics 5 75722-2 (without texts). On this Chandos recording of the Triumphlied the Danish National Orchestra and Chorus under maestro Albrecht demonstrate mastery of the composer's sheer splendour and extravagant invention. In the third movement we are joined by the characterful and convincing performance from baritone Bo Skovhus pronouncing St. John's vision, "And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse..."

Brahms originally composed the Ave Maria in 1858 for female voices and organ. In 1859 he added some light woodwind to the organ accompaniment. It is thought that Brahms was inspired to write the work by a passage from Die Lebensansichten des Katers Murr by E.T.A. Hoffman a work that the composer so admired.

The Ave Maria is a charming and gentle work and is gloriously performed by the Danish

National Choir with clarity, lightness and a real sense of freshness. A brief piece, the Ave Maria has been recorded many times, frequently appearing as part of classical compilations. Two alternative versions that I admire are by the St. Bride's Church Choir, Fleet Street, London under the baton of Robert Jones on Naxos 8.553877 and the Corydon Singers conducted by Matthew Best on Hyperion CDA 66389.

It was undoubtedly the success of his German Requiem, op 45, in 1868 that provided Brahms with the inspiration to compose other large-scale works for chorus and orchestra. Sometimes referred to as Brahms's 'Little Requiem' the Schicksalslied (Song of Fate or Song of Destiny) for four-part chorus and orchestra was composed between 1868 and 1871. Whilst visiting the German naval seaport of Wilhelmshaven with his friend Albert Dietrich, Brahms was captivated by a poem he discovered by Friedrich Hölderlin entitled Hyperions Schicksalslied; almost immediately he was deep in composition.

Described as achingly beautiful the Schicksalslied contains great drama. The Danish National Symphony Orchestra and Choir rise superbly to the occasion giving a passionate and vibrant performance which was quite breathtaking. Of the several available recordings of this piece I have affection for the readings by the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and Orchestra under Robert Shaw on Telarc CD80176 and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and Chorus under Herbert Blomstedt on a Decca double 452 582-2.

The final work on this release is the impressive and exciting Nänie (Threnody or Lament) for four-part chorus and orchestra. Intended as a musical memorial to his friend Anselm Feuerbach the painter, Brahms composed the score between 1880 and 1881 and uses a text by Friedrich Schiller. Portraying the shadow of death the singularly impressive Nänie is a reflective lamentation, extremely elegiac and strong in nobility. In the Chandos booklet notes the author enthuses, "For sheer heartbreaking beauty of sound and line, Nänie is possibly the most radiant thing he ever wrote." In 1947 biographer Karl Geiringer describes the work as having, "a spirit of perfect harmony, tranquil and serene."

The Danish National Chorus and Symphony Orchestra are distinguished throughout the score giving a memorable and thoughtful performance under the telling direction of Gerd Albrecht. The lyrical Nänie has been reasonably well served on record and three accounts worthy of praise are those from the Berlin Radio Chorus and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Claudio Abbado on Deutsche Grammophon 435 791-2, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and Chorus under Herbert Blomstedt on Decca double 452 582-2 and the New Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra under Wilhelm Pitz available as part of a five disc set on EMI Classics 5 75722-2 (without texts).

Rarely am I entirely satisfied with recordings of works for chorus and orchestra where the technical demands are clearly problematic for the sound engineers. No problems here on this Chandos release which has the finest recorded sound of its genre that I have heard for some considerable time. None of the competition are able to vie with this collection which is now the pack-leader. The total playing time is rather meagre but this becomes insignificant with performances as superior as these; magnificent works, magnificently recorded. This Chandos release should be in the collection of every classical music lover. Indispensable! ---Michael Cookson, musicweb-international.com

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