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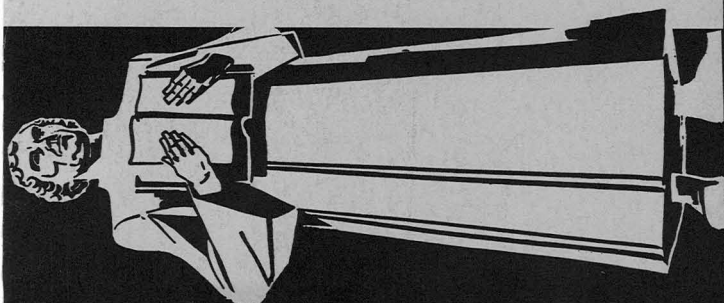
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Sacred Choral Works Of Brahms

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Lutheran Musical Tradition in The Sacred Choral Works of Brahms

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IN LUTHERAN musical tradition, the composer's primary concern is the proclamation of the Word. That is why music is one of that church's pedagogical tools for teaching and reinforcing its theology. Therefore, certain thematic essentials will invariably exist in Lutheran texts, if, indeed, they are to be considered as functionally "Lutheran."

Thus, when ascertaining the Lutheran musical tradition in the sacred choral works of Brahms, both compositional and textual features will be analyzed. This dual consideration will bring out the fact that with Brahms there is a complete identification with the typical compositional forms of the Lutheran past, but very little theological similarity between his and its traditional texts. This observation, of course, elicits the question, why such a dichotomy in Brahms? Answers to this question will be proposed subsequently, but after first describing the particulars of Brahms' compositional and textual characteristics.

When surveying the whole nineteenth century, it is significant to note that Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Reger were the only major composers to manifest serious interest in the chorale compositional forms of Lutheran tradition. And this was done at a time when the prevailing interest of composers was in symphonic, chamber, operatic, and solo literature. Of the three composers, Brahms maintained the closest ties with the past, for he limited himself primarily to the genres of the chorale prelude (Cf. *Eleven Chorale Preludes for Organ*, Op. 122) and the chorale motet.¹ Hence, the compositional aspect of his sacred works may be seen, for the most part, as a logical continuation of the chorale composition of representative men like Heinrich Schütz and J. S. Bach. Since Brahms was an eminent Schütz-Bach scholar, well-known especially through his activities as director of the *Vienna Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*² and his editing pursuits, it is without surprise that Brahms' sacred music bears the influence of these his traditional Lutheran "idols."

Many are the compositions which exemplify the Bach-Schütz influence. For example, *Schaffe in mir, Gott, ein rein Herz*, Op. 29, No. 2, well demonstrates the chorale motet style of Bach. It shows an ingenious command of Bach counterpoint. The four sections feature two canons and two fugues in alternating sequence. The first section is of special interest since canon by augmentation is here so beautifully

reproduced. Secondly, *Drei Moteten*, Op. 110, demonstrates the Schütz styles. Nos. 1 and 3 remind one of the separated double choir motet tradition with its multi polyphonic-homophonic contrasts and its interesting imitative procedures. In No. 2 Brahms salutes the Schütz "Becker" Psalter through his use of homophony with its typical cadential rhythmic shiftings. And finally strains of the Bach double choir motet tradition (i.e. *Komm, Jesu, komm*) can frequently be heard in Brahms' *Fest- und Gedenksprüche*, Op. 109, with its more predictable polyphony and extended fugal developments. As the above adequately demonstrates, the sacred choral works of Brahms obviously reflect Lutheran compositional tradition. Brahms has thoroughly digested the chorale motet idiom and has ingeniously preserved the numerous compositional developments of both Schütz and Bach in his own sacred choral works.

However, with Lutheran textual tradition Brahms does not identify. For example, when texts of Luther, Schütz, and Bach are perused, four characteristics consistently appear. First of all, texts will usually be objective, or be within an objective context. The vicarious atonement of Christ and His resurrection are dominant themes. Sanctification is always clearly a result of Justification. It's the saving activity of God which is a greater concern than the way we feel about "being saved." Secondly, the majority of texts will in some way implicitly or explicitly identify with a confession of the Trinity. A third trait most texts show is corporateness. That is, a sense of being a part of the Body of Christ, the Church, the Communion of Saints. It is an awareness that the child of God functions not in a vacuum, but with fellow believers. It is a recognition of the universal needs of all believers. And the final characteristic found in many texts is a sense of responsibility toward one's fellowman, that is, neighbor, community, country, and world. Appendix A shows two typically Lutheran hymn texts and identify some of the four textual characteristics by number.

In contrast, Brahms' texts seem to purposely avoid what is typically Lutheran.³ Though, in general, many manifest an objective approach, not one is specific as to the vicarious atonement or Christ's resurrection. *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*, Op. 29, No. 1, is the only work that mentions the name of Jesus Christ. There is not one work that is specifically Trinitarian, although four seem to refer to it by vague implication, namely, *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, Op. 45; *Triumphlied*, Op. 55; *Motet*, Op. 29, No. 2; and *Motet*, Op. 74, No. 2. In general, Brahms' texts are corporate in nature, since most use the plural pronoun, but not specific in the typically Lutheran sense described above. He also avoids texts that apply faith to life's relationships. And, even though Brahms uses portions of Scriptures and certain stanzas of four traditional chorale texts, his choices do not exemplify typically Lutheran concerns. For example, when quoting St. Paul in I Corinthians 15 in *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, Op. 45, he simply states the question, "O death, where is thy victory?" and does not give the crucial answer, "But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Furthermore, it is significant that Brahms does not use the

typically Lutheran large compositional structures of the cantatas, passion, and oratorio, even though there was a revival of these forms during his lifetime. For if he had used them, it would have been virtually impossible to be as general and vague, since these forms, by their very nature, are so structured to make specific textual applications, moving from the general to the particular, the spiritual account to the mundane meaning. By avoiding these and using only the choral motet choral forms, he could more easily avoid the typically Lutheran textual characteristics.

Why does Brahms then so freely identify with the Lutheran musical tradition, but only through his use of certain compositional forms and not its unique textual features? First of all, Brahms was a Romanticist, and a genuine Romanticist had the utmost respect for the development of the past. This reverence is additionally demonstrated by the homage paid, for instance, to Palestrina through his *Drei Geistliche Chöre für Frauenstimmen*, Op. 37. Secondly, and primarily, he was a devoted German, and his nationalistic pride could not slight his own nation's two musical giants. It is not surprising then to observe his main identification with Schütz and Bach. Lutheran loyalty or fervor for functioning with Lutheran textual tradition had nothing to do with this decision. Incidentally, he was not reluctant to set typically Roman Catholic texts to music, such as the *Marienlieder*, Op. 22, and the *Ave Maria*, Op. 12. For him the Lutheran function of music was clearly not his task; but the preservation of the musical forms was. Thus, Brahms can be considered a part of the Lutheran musical tradition only in the compositional sense, since his particular contribution did not accomplish pedagogically what that tradition was established to do through its theologically Lutheran texts.

APPENDIX A

The Lutheran Hymnal #313

O Lord, we praise Thee, bless Thee, and adore Thee,

In thanksgiving bow before Thee.

Thou with Thy body and Thy blood didst nourish

Our weak souls that they may flourish:
(1)

O Lord, have mercy! (2)

May Thy body, Lord, born of Mary,
That our sins and sorrows did carry, (1)
And Thy blood for us plead

In all trial, fear, and need: (1)

O Lord, have mercy! (2)

Thy holy body into death was given, (1)
Life to win for us in heaven.

No greater love than this to Thee could bind us; (1)

May this feast thereof remind us!

O Lord, have mercy! (2)

Lord, Thy kindness did so constrain Thee
That Thy blood should bless and sustain
me. (1)

All our debt Thou hast paid; (1)
Peace with God once more is made:

O Lord, have mercy! (2)

May God bestow on us His grace and favor (1)

To please Him with our behavior (4)

And live as brethren here in love and union (4)

Nor repent this blest Communion!

O Lord, have mercy! (2)

Let not Thy good Spirit forsake us;
Grant that heavenly minded He make us;
Give Thy Church, Lord, to see (3)

Days of peace and unity:

O Lord, have mercy! (2)

The Lutheran Hymnal #377

Salvation unto us has come
By God's free grace and favor; (1)

Good works cannot avert our doom,

They help and save us never. (1)

Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,

Who did for all the world atone;

He is our one Redeemer. (1)

APPENDIX A (cont.)

Since Christ hath full atonement made
 And brought to us salvation, (1)
 Each Christian therefore may be glad
 And build on this foundation.
 Thy grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,
 Thy death is now my life indeed,
 For Thou hast paid my ransom. (1)

Let me not doubt, but trust in Thee,
 Thy Word cannot be broken;
 Thy call rings out, "Come unto Me!"
 No falsehood hast Thou spoken.
 Baptized into Thy precious name, (3)
 My faith cannot be put to shame,
 And I shall never perish.

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone
 And rests in Him unceasing;
 And by its fruits true faith is known,
 And love and hope increasing. (1)
 Yet faith alone doth justify,
 Works serve thy neighbor and supply (4)
 The proof that faith is living.

All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise
 To Father, Son, and Spirit,
 The God that saved us by His grace,—
 All glory to His merit! (2)
 O Triune God in heaven above,
 Who hast revealed Thy saving love,
 Thy blessed name be hallowed. (2)

FOOTNOTES

1. R. A. Jordahl, "A Study of the Use of the Chorale in the Works of Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Reger," Unpublished dissertation, University of Rochester, Eastman School of Music, 1965.
2. Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work*, p. 113.