



# Hope in the

## Teaching Sacred Music in a Secular Context

by Thomas Lloyd

**Editor's note:** This article is adapted from an essay first published in the May 2005 edition of the online journal *Constellation* published by the Center for Progressive Christianity <[www.tpc.org](http://www.tpc.org)>.

**W**e are fortunate to have as our daily work the opportunity to teach the inspired music of the Western choral tradition to singers eager for the personal and collective nourishment this music can offer. However, one of the major challenges in teaching this repertoire to our school and community choirs is that many of these works are explicitly based in the Christian tradition.

The choirs I currently direct are all in secular situations. My college choirs are made up of undergraduate students in colleges founded by Quakers in the nineteenth century, but now religiously quite diverse and secular. Jewish, Asian, and Islamic traditions are represented as well as Protestant and Catholic. My large community choir, on the other hand,

is much more religiously and racially homogeneous (being predominantly white and Christian), reflective of much of middle-American suburbia. The members of all my choirs relate to their faith traditions in various ways, ranging from committed to alienated.

### Probing the Distinction Between Secular and Sacred in Contemporary Culture

As independent organizations, my choirs are thankfully free from being caught in the crossfire of the culture wars waged in recent years in the public schools, with many vocal music teachers finding themselves in the eye of the storm. And yet, this very freedom begs the question: what does it mean to teach and perform sacred music with groups of people who do not share a common religious point of view? Can music composed from the wellspring of religious faith be understood and performed with authenticity from outside the point of view of that faith?

For evangelical musicians I have known, particularly in



# Unified Language of Music:

the black church tradition, it is impossible, even hypocritical to suggest that they could sing gospel music from outside the perspective of their faith commitment, whether directing a church choir or school choir. When the long-time director of our college gospel choir (from one of the local black churches) had to move on a few years ago, one of the chief struggles for the students was finding a director who could bring passion to the music without bringing their evangelical fervor as well, a fervor which makes many of these students, both black and white, uncomfortable.

Many African-American musicians are refreshingly honest about the relationship between their faith and their music-making. I've shared concerts in auditoriums with directors of historical black college choirs singing spirituals where the director has made it clear to the audience that the religious content of the music is for them an expression of faith as well

as of historical resistance to slavery.

And yet, when I've brought my college touring choir to sing at Sunday morning services in black churches, I've also been surprised at how comfortable the students become, even in the presence of altar calls and openly devotional language. It has made me wonder if they would be as comfortable in a predominantly white evangelical church. Is it the genuine warmth and inclusiveness of a black church congregation that makes us feel less threatened, or are we not taking the faith of the black church as seriously as we should?

## **How Do Our Singers Perceive Our Point of View in Teaching Sacred Music?**

In a survey I handed out to my larger college choir, I asked for their perceptions of the manner in which I teach sacred music. The responses suggested that many of the non-religious students in the choir thought that, if anything, I should talk more freely about the religious elements in the music. On the other hand, I recently was asked to fill in conducting my (Presbyterian) church's large senior choir for a couple of services. Having not been in front of a church choir in over a decade, I was surprised to find myself occasionally fumbling for words to express my religious response to the music, even knowing that people in front of me shared my

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faith perspective.

Before delving further into these often controversial waters, I should briefly describe my own religious background. My involvement with organized religion was varied and at times conflicted. I grew up as a Roman Catholic on the cusp of the upheaval of the reforms of Vatican II with a mother who was a non-practicing Protestant, and a Catholic father who attended church but no longer received the sacraments (because of disagreements over some basic doctrinal issues). In the middle of my musical training, I took a brief detour to attend an interdenominational divinity school as a candidate for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, inspired in part by the eleven courageous women who were ordained by four retired bishops in Philadelphia.

At the end of two years in seminary, I returned to my music studies, though this time in vocal music rather than instrumental. I had come to believe that my “calling” was to deal with issues of faith and spirituality in the more diverse secular world rather than within the more clearly defined boundaries of the ordained ministry. Though it shouldn’t have



surprised me at the time, this eventually led to my long-term involvement with choral music.


### Brahms’s *Ein Deutsches Requiem* as a Model for Transcending the Religious Divide

One of the most beloved works in the sacred choral repertoire is Johannes Brahms’s *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. It occupies a somewhat unique place in the repertoire because, while it draws in part on texts from the books of the New Testament, Brahms consciously sought a more

universal spiritual context for his music. Like many of the great classical composers of sacred music, Brahms lived on the fringes of Christian orthodoxy, speaking of himself as an agnostic, but being as private about his religious beliefs as he was about his personal feelings in general.<sup>1</sup> Living in a Vienna where Roman Catholicism held the reigns of power but Jews individually often played leading roles in the advancement of culture, his close relationships with Jewish musicians opened his eyes to the virulent anti-Semitism of the time.

He called his requiem “German” in part to distinguish it from the Latin requiem texts of the Roman liturgy. His choice and arrangement of passages drawn from both the Old and New Testaments of Luther’s bible showed that regardless of his distance from organized religion, he was steeped in the literature of the scriptures. But when confronted before the first performance with the fact that he had omitted any direct mention of Christ, even in passages where including the next verse would have done so, he simply answered:

As far as the text is concerned, I confess that I would gladly omit even the word “German” and instead use the word “Human” [Requiem]; also with my best knowledge and will would I dispense with places like St. John 3:16 [“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son”]. On the other hand, I have chosen one thing or another



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because I am a musician, because I needed it, and because with my venerable authors I can't delete or dispute anything. But I had better stop before I say too much."<sup>2</sup>

Despite Brahms's protestations, the soprano aria "I know that my Redeemer Liveth" from Handel's *Messiah* was inserted in the middle of the first performance of the *Requiem* in order to make it sufficiently "Christian."

Brahms seemed to be saying that he preferred to let his music speak for itself, apart from any exclusive orthodoxies. And judging by the response of singers and audiences, he succeeded in writing music that speaks genuinely to people from a wide range of faith perspectives. That is, it does much more than simply avoid offending anyone; it resonates profoundly with people, both those who would disclaim any religious affiliation at all and those whose religious convictions are far more explicitly Christian than the text of the *Requiem*.

### Adapting Christian Scriptures to a More Universal Context

The central theme of Brahms's *Requiem* is comfort for the living rather than mourning for the dead. The opening passage is from the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matt. 5:4) The central and best known movement is a setting of verses from Psalm 84, "How lovely is thy dwelling place," celebrating the womb-like security of the "courts of the Lord." A later inserted fifth movement for soprano solo and chorus was probably inspired by the death of Brahms's mother (despite his frequent denials), setting a text from Isaiah (66:12): "I will comfort you as a mother would comfort you."

The appeal to the universal longing for security and reconciliation is obvious enough in these passages. But the *Requiem* also reaches its dramatic climax in the penultimate movement in an epic battle between the forces of light and darkness (similar to that found in the "Dies Irae" settings of the great Latin requiems), and it is the power of this music that I think people find most irresistible. Here Brahms employs a passage from Paul's

first letter to the Corinthians (15:51–52, 54–55) referring to the redemption of the faithful on the last day ("we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed, at the sound of the last trumpet").


In an electrifying musical sequence, the chorus defiantly cries out the taunting phrases that follow in this passage: "Death, where is thy sting? Hell, where is thy victory?" At this point in the epistle, Paul answers his own rhetorical question with the lines "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (NIV).

However, in the music, Brahms drops these lines and replaces them with the more generally symbolic words of praise found in the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation (4:11) This text is proclaimed with the grandest, most joyous fugue of the *Requiem*: "Lord, Thou art worthy to receive praise and glory and power; for Thou hast all things created, and through your will they have their being." The conclusion of this fugue leads directly into

the opening of the final movement, music that suggests a grand procession of the faithful into the heavenly kingdom. The words Brahms chooses here are again from the book of Revelation (14:13): "Blessed are the dead, who have died in the Lord from now on—yea, the Spirit speaks—for they rest from their labor and their works follow after them."

### Musical Ways of Knowing and the Mystery of Death

It is not surprising that this epic battle with death, so central to many of the most profound works in the Western canon (such as the Latin requiems of Mozart, Berlioz, Verdi, and Britten) finds its way to the center of Brahms's self-texted "comfort" requiem. Death is a topic that we are only able to examine from one side. And yet few can resist the power death holds over our imaginations through its combination of certitude and mystery. We have long been led to ask whether there is a larger context to our



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world beyond death, and if so what purpose that context gives to our lives on this side of the wall.

This is where our human speculation begins—what some call faith and others call wishful thinking—where some reach for certainty and others are comfortable embracing the mystery. Some seek to connect to traditional beliefs developed by generations of those who have already passed through the door we still face. Others urge us to live in the present while we can, for that is all we have for sure.

Deprived of empirical ways of testing the meanings hidden by death, we are left to pursue other ways of “knowing”—intuitions growing out of individual prayer, meditation, or reflection, and, just as importantly, out of communal ritual. In fact, it is here in ritual, whether of religious liturgy or secular performance or ceremony, where music often plays the critical role. Music enables us to overcome the limitations of verbal expression, evocatively conveying a sense of meaning that has both clarity and transcendence.

This is what Brahms, in his youthful requiem (written when he was only in his thirties) has accomplished so well. The final statement in the sixth movement of the retort “Death, where is thy sting” and the concluding fugue and “procession into the kingdom” are so utterly convincing in their defiance of death’s power, that most people cannot help but respond with a personal sense of recognition and joy. Though each listener might articulate it in a very different way, some using religious

language and some not, most listeners respond to this music with a sense that something very specific that seems “true” to their experience is being expressed.

### A Means to Unity and the Possibility of Transcendence?

And yet the words Brahms has chosen as the point of departure for this music could not be more generic as to doctrinal content. They express essential human desires (see his words above, “I would gladly omit even the word “German” and instead use the word “Human”) – the desires to overcome the limitations of death and to find meaning in one’s life (“and their works will follow after them”). These desires can be approached through his music from any number of religious or non-religious perspectives without compromise. And those multifarious desires can be expressed simultaneously in the privacy of each individual’s imagination and in the collective awareness of the community of listeners and performers. Brahms’s music makes it possible for people who normally wouldn’t be comfortable praying together to have a sense of common understanding in spite of a variety of individual interpretations.

This unifying power of transcendence of which music is sometimes capable<sup>3</sup> can enhance the capacity of religious faith to play a more peaceful rather than destructive role in our world. An experience of being part of a performance of Brahms’s “Human” requiem can affirm that it is possible for people to express a unified

spiritual longing without sacrificing the integrity of their own traditions. Where purely verbal statements of unity can be so general as to be empty of meaning, music can communicate in clearly defined ways that people who don’t share the same language or faith perspective can understand on a non-verbal level.<sup>4</sup>

Brahms’s approach is perhaps most comfortable for Christians who see in the lives and writings of figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, and Martin Luther King, Jr. the basis for a Christian faith that holds that one can have strongly held theological beliefs while at the same time respecting the validity of a variety of other religious and philosophical points of view. But there are also other Christians and non-Christians who would contest the very idea that this kind of collectively unified but individually diverse interpretive understanding of sacred texts can be either genuinely meaningful on the one hand or truly non-coercive on the other. And Brahms’s selection and editing of texts for his *Requiem* to conform to his inclusivist vision remains atypical to say the least. Most of the sacred music in the Western tradition sets texts that are taken whole from the Bible or from Christian liturgies. But Brahms does provide a creative model as a composer that we as performers can attempt to mirror with more explicitly sectarian sacred works.

When we choose to teach sacred choral music to our secular school and community choirs, we accept dual obligations. On the one hand, we must respect the integrity of our singers’ diverse perspectives on religion and not make them feel that they need to personally subscribe to a particular faith to fully understand or interpret the music. Being open about our own religious or anti-religious biases insofar as they might color the way we talk about a piece can be helpful in this regard. It can also be helpful to make it clear that performing sacred music in concert is not a collective act of worship. Singers should know that anyone who feels uncomfortable for any reason about the religious context of a piece or a performance can discuss it with the director without fear of judgment or coercion.

On the other hand, we have an obligation to do justice to the integrity of the



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music itself. Can we do this by merely glossing over the sacred context of the music or by ignoring it altogether? One could argue that even Bach and Handel adapted music for their sacred works that they had originally composed for secular texts, just as Renaissance composers wrote countless masses based on bar-room tunes such as “L’homme armé.” But these composers lived in a time when religious perceptions weren’t as neatly compartmentalized as they are for us today—for them all human material related to human expression was within the reach of spiritual transformation and transcendence. I would argue that unless we strive to teach music on its own terms, including its sacred dimension, we will be depriving our singers and our audiences of the full richness it can offer.

There are no simple formulas for how to teach sacred music in this way. In the panel discussion that follows this article, there are several examples of how different conductors have done this in practice. A common analogy for teaching sacred music to secular choirs is that of an actor in the theater. An actor tries to understand his or her character on its own terms, trying to find emotional connections between the character and one’s own experience. Yet the challenge and reward of acting is taking on some of the characteristics of someone who is different than you, knowing that once you leave the stage you resume being yourself, though perhaps with a richer understanding of what it means to be human.

**Brahms’s Later Requiem:  
The Pessimism of Experience,  
with a Glimmer of Hope**

Towards the end of his life, Brahms wrote what many consider to be his other “requiem,” his *Vier Ernste Gesänge*, op. 121 [Four Serious Songs] for solo voice and piano. Having confronted the limitations of his own artistic and personal frailties, he chooses several bitter texts from Ecclesiastes – “I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. For who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?”(3:21–22), and, “I turned and considered all those who suffered oppression under the sun; and behold, there

were tears of those who suffered oppression and had no comforter” (4:1). But the text he chose for the fourth and last song again draws on Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, finishing with “We see now through a glass, an obscure word, but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then shall I know, even as I am known. For now, faith, hope, love, these three abide; but the greatest of these is love.” (I Cor. 13:12–13, translated from Luther’s German version used by Brahms).

Music is perhaps uniquely capable of touching those mysteries of life and death, love and fear, meaning and purpose for which our temporal understanding is so obscure and limited. In a world frequently torn apart by religious animosity and violence, it may be naïve to believe that musicians can help bring people closer together through the performance of musical settings of the sacred texts of one religious tradition or another. But where else do we have such a bountiful opportunity to safely, together, reach beyond our own limited understanding of what it is to be human?

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Steinberg has written eloquently on this topic in the introduction to his new *Choral Masterworks – A Listener’s Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, excerpted in *The Voice of Chorus America*, Volume 28, Number 3, Spring 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> Letter from Brahms to Carl Martin Reinthaler, in *Briefwechsel, Vol. III*, (Berlin 1908–22, reprinted Tutzing 1974) p. 7. A translation of the complete letter can be found in Styra Avins and Joseph Eisinger, *Johannes Brahms—Life and Letters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> I use qualifiers such as “sometimes” here and elsewhere because music itself is a tool that like any other tool can be used

for good or destructive purposes, and everything in between. There is a special danger for musicians to merely escape into the special language in which they are conversant, leading to music which can become self-absorbed, an end in itself rather than a potential means for unity and transcendence.

<sup>4</sup> Some scientists who study evolution are now suggesting that music’s very early role in human evolution may have been the result of its power to enhance social bonding and cohesion. See Michael Balter, “Evolution of Behavior: Seeking the Key to Music” in *Science*, Vol 306, Issue 5699, pp. 1120–1122, November 12, 2004.