

A portrait of Johannes Brahms, a young man with wavy brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and a dark red bow tie. He is seated and looking slightly to the left. The background is a textured, mottled grey.

# BRAHMS'S

## *A German Requiem*

Reconsidering Its Biblical, Historical, and Musical Contexts

R. Allen Lott

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Brahms's *A German Requiem*

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R. Allen Lott



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Cover image: Johannes Brahms, ca. 1866–67. Courtesy of Brahms-Institut an der Musikhochschule Lübeck.

*To “friends on earth and friends above”*



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*Soli Deo Gloria!*

# Abbreviations

<i>AmZ</i>	<i>Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung</i>
<i>BB</i>	<i>Brahms Briefwechsel</i>
B-I	Brahms-Institut an der Musikhochschule Lübeck ( <a href="http://www.brahms-institut.de">www.brahms-institut.de</a> )
<i>Caecilia</i>	<i>Caecilia: Algemeen muzikaal tijdschrift van Nederland</i>
<i>LL</i>	Brahms, <i>Life and Letters</i> , ed. Styra Avins
<i>MW</i>	<i>Musikalisches Wochenblatt</i>
<i>NBM</i>	<i>Neue Berliner Musikzeitung</i>
<i>NZfM</i>	<i>Neue Zeitschrift für Musik</i>
<i>Signale</i>	<i>Signale für die musikalische Welt</i>





# Note to the Reader

Translations are mine unless otherwise identified. I have used published translations when possible, but also generally include citations to the original German source for ease of verification when they relate closely to Brahms. I note where I have occasionally emended published translations when certain terms directly germane to my argument seem to be lacking in fidelity to the original German. For the sake of space and ultimately price, the original texts of all new translations are available online (as are other resources). Once the reader opens the file, accessing the original texts should be simpler than repeatedly turning to endnotes. Single words or very brief phrases are usually given within the main text.

The German word “Konfession” is particularly significant to this study. As will be discussed, in nineteenth-century Germany the term “Konfession” generally referred to one of the Christian churches recognized by the state: Lutheran, Reformed, or Catholic. Today, it is more often translated “denomination,” suggesting a specific branch within Protestantism. For the sake of clarity if not accuracy, I have consistently translated it as “confession.” It is not always clear which meaning modern writers are trying to convey.

The translation of the texts from *Ein deutsches Requiem* follow Brahms’s text based on Luther’s German translation. All other scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation; used by permission.

Throughout the text, *Requiem* in italics designates Brahms’s work. In roman type, Requiem indicates the traditional liturgical text or individual musical settings of it. For more commonly known works, I generally use the English-language title (*The Creation*, *St. Paul*, *Elijah*); for those less familiar, I offer the original German with an English translation. I am admittedly inconsistent with this, but I have tried to write what would seem natural to readers of English who already know many of the works discussed. *Matthäus-Passion* seems a bit pretentious. Still, I have chosen to always refer to *Ein deutsches Requiem* (despite the friendlier English translation in the book’s

title) for historical purposes. It is important to remember, of course, that virtually all works (except those in Latin) would have been performed in German in German-speaking areas.

Many first editions of Brahms's music and numerous other primary sources, including programs, are available in the digital archive of the Brahms-Institut an der Musikhochschule Lübeck ([www.brahms-institut.de](http://www.brahms-institut.de)). Some of these are specifically cited in the notes.

Besides the original-language texts of new translations, other resources are available online. These are called supplements in the text and are listed below.

The phrase from the dedication appears in the hymn "For the beauty of the earth" by Folliott S. Pierpoint, published in 1864, shortly before Brahms completed his *Requiem*.

### Online material

The following supplemental material is available on the publisher's website (<https://boydellandbrewer.com/brahms-s-i-a-german-requiem-i-hb.html>):

Supplement A: Translations and Original Texts of Foreign-Language Quotations

Supplement B: Works Published before *Ein deutsches Requiem* with Subtitles including "nach Worten der heiligen Schrift" or Similar Phrase

Supplement C: Texts of *Ein deutsches Requiem* Previously Set by Other Composers

Supplement D: Performances of *Ein deutsches Requiem*, 1867–82 (expanded version)

# Opening Statement

Johannes Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem) is one of those rare works equally respected by scholars and beloved by performers and audiences, and it continues to be one of the most often performed choral works from the nineteenth century. It engages listeners through its broad range of expressive styles—from somber and tragic, tender and lyrical, to triumphant and sublime—and speaks to them through its spiritual emphasis on the inescapable human experience of grief, with both its acknowledgment of sorrow and its provision for hope. For singers, its choral writing is challenging yet gratifying, and its moderate length in comparison to the typically protracted choral pieces from the same century makes it more sensible for organizations to program and more reasonable for audiences to absorb. For Brahms scholars, it is the composer's most substantial work, which solidified Brahms's reputation and serves as an excellent example of his masterful assimilation and continuation of the German music tradition.

One might expect that such a widely admired and richly textured work would be the subject of an extensive array of scholarly interpretations, particularly with the seemingly endless supply of approaches to musical and literary analysis currently available. However, modern appraisals of the *Requiem* offer a consistent, almost monolithic, judgment. Recent evaluations of the *Requiem* are virtually unanimous in their opinion that, even though it sets only biblical passages, the work was vigilantly crafted by its composer to avoid specific references to Christianity and therefore speaks to all humanity through texts universal in their application. For example, Michael Musgrave, a leading Brahms scholar and an expert on the *Requiem*, claims it “has become one of the most universal expressions of religious sentiment” and that “the work was essentially humanist in conception.”<sup>1</sup> Curiously, most recent writers deny a Christian reading of the work, and yet none have provided a robust alternative interpretation in its place. They fervently preach what it is *not* about but fail to clarify what, in their estimation, it actually communicates.

My goal in this book is to present a convincing argument that the *Requiem* is not theologically or doctrinally inclusive but instead adroitly summarizes the unique Christian view of death, grief, and an afterlife. Although this notion may be foreign—if not anathema—to the current perception of the *Requiem*, it is one held by many Christians familiar with the work and blissfully unexposed to musicological discourse.<sup>2</sup> My objective to validate a Christian interpretation of the *Requiem* is not simply wishful thinking but rather one that is the result of an in-depth study of the various contexts of the work—biblical, historical, and musical—contexts and traditions that Brahms well understood and embraced as a composer, if perhaps not as a believer. Even though the very idea of such a reading may be met today with great incredulity, my viewpoint was shared by most of Brahms's contemporaries, including informed critics and learned musicologists. Based on what modern scholars have suggested about the work and its early reception, such a discovery may seem astonishing. Indeed, their conclusions about the work's intentionally nebulous spirituality are voiced so confidently that it is hardly imaginable that any corroborating evidence could be mustered to endorse my position. Nevertheless, most early writers quite instinctively perceived the work through a long-established biblical lens, and their eye-witness (and ear-witness) testimony will provide a steady stream of confirmation of my position throughout this book.

In addition to early writings about the *Requiem*, I rely on literary theory, theological studies, church history, early performance traditions, and musical analysis as well as basic logic to demonstrate how a Christian perspective of the work is not only allowable but the most rational one to adopt. My conception of the work will be amply supported by judicious reasoning and substantial data, whereas many current assessments seem to be mere pronouncements with little authenticating proof. Much of the early documentation I submit about the *Requiem* has been misunderstood or has remained unexplored, whether inadvertently overlooked or perhaps even deliberately suppressed.

Notwithstanding my obvious disagreement with the explanation of the *Requiem* by most other writers, I offer my arguments in the spirit of a healthy academic discussion and gratefully acknowledge the contributions of fellow scholars to the understanding of Brahms and his music that provide a strong foundation for much of my work. Although I hesitate to be too harsh in critiquing their judgments, because their collective stance has been so thoroughly accepted by the multitudes, I fear that a gentle rebuke will be too easily disregarded, and so a certain bluntness seems necessary. Ultimately,

though, I appreciate the opportunity to illuminate an important aspect about such a great work, one that deserves as thorough a consideration as possible.

I anticipate that many readers will be skeptical about what they are about to confront, due to either what has been repeatedly introduced to them as expert opinion or their own desire for the *Requiem* to convey a spiritual message vague enough to harmonize with their personal amalgamation of beliefs. I ask from these readers an open mind (just as a jury is asked to ignore pretrial publicity), patience, and a willingness to follow my reasoning carefully. In other words, as someone concisely summarized God's message in the book of Job, "trust me." Debunking a myth that has become so deeply ingrained will take considerable evidence and a step-by-step review of the facts. Whether or not a reader is interested in my principal thesis or is finally persuaded of its viability, I believe everyone will be exposed to valuable information about the manifold contexts of the work and how it was first received. In that light, I address the book to all those who treasure the *Requiem* in some manner or another, whether as scholars, performers, or listeners. The documentation is for the musicologists, but the main text is designed to be accessible to all those desiring to increase their appreciation of the *Requiem*.

In this study I follow a strait and narrow path, focusing on the issues related to my particular claims. Therefore, such common topics as the work's genesis and its musical structure will not be addressed. Chapter 1 presents the basis for my argument that investigating the original biblical context of the passages set by Brahms in the *Requiem* is not only permissible but a completely natural process and even a necessary one. A variety of literary theories are invoked, though not for the purpose of being fashionable or bending the text to my will. Rather, the concepts I draw on seek to explain how normal readers (and listeners) innately analyze a text and how they attempt to discern its meaning. Brahms's expectations of his listeners for several of his other choral works and the hermeneutical clues he provides them in regard to the *Requiem*, whatever his intentions might have been, will also buttress my approach.

Chapter 2, in some ways the heart of the book, contains a biblical exegesis of the *Requiem* text that decodes its pervasive and deeply imbedded Christian teaching. The work's distinctive Christian standpoint will be shown to differ substantially from that of other religions, despite recent verdicts, as well as from general nineteenth-century philosophical and literary attitudes.

Chapter 3 considers early reports on the work's text that illustrate the common view of the time that the *Requiem* was a Christian work and even a specifically Protestant one. Based on my inspection of current scholarship, I

naively began my research assuming that few early sources would articulate a Christian outlook. Possibly you will be as amazed as I was at what I discovered, but in retrospect I should have known better. An opening section examines the contemporaneous state of religious belief, which elucidates why a Christian perspective of the *Requiem* in nineteenth-century Germany was a perfectly instinctive response. Altogether, the chapter serves as a cautionary tale for the need to read original documents for oneself.

Chapter 4 surveys the first fifteen years of performances of the *Requiem* and demonstrates how the earliest audiences experienced the work in a variety of Christian circumstances. Contrary to what other scholars have implied, the *Requiem* was deemed appropriate for Good Friday and was frequently performed on that day as well as on other days during Holy Week and for other Lutheran religious observances. Brahms's exchange of letters with Karl Reinthaler, who prepared the Bremen premiere of the *Requiem* and whose comments are persistently quoted to defend a non-Christian explanation of the piece, will be studied in detail, with different conclusions. Other issues relating to performance and reception will also substantiate not only a Christian reading of the text but a Protestant one.

Chapter 5 addresses the musical traditions of the *Requiem*, examining Brahms's meticulous setting of the biblical texts he chose and his appropriation of German sacred musical styles. Brahms made a crucial decision when he decided to reference in the *Requiem* such previous sacred masterworks as Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, and Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, and his historically focused sensibility confirms musically the analysis of the text presented in the preceding chapters.

Throughout the study I call on the testimony from many of Brahms's contemporaries. Brahms may have said extremely little about his own music, but a diverse array of other authors provides an abundance of source material filled with perceptive observations. Opinions are drawn from early performance reviews, substantive essays concerning the printed score, and other publications on Brahms's music in general or on the *Requiem* in particular that either appeared during Brahms's lifetime or shortly thereafter. Most of the performance reviews are unsigned, but many of the other authors cited here were well-known critics, scholars, and teachers, and several were friends and acquaintances of the composer. It is time for their insights to be revealed and properly understood. In addition, assorted "exhibits" alternate with the chapters of the book and generally present documentary evidence in an objective and compact form to support my case. These include the first complete English translation of Reinthaler's letter to Brahms, which provides a

different perspective from the few sentences that have been previously tendered, and a lengthy essay by a conservative German theologian espousing an evangelical position on the work.

As I initiate a systematic investigation of the biblical, historical, and musical traditions embodied in the *Requiem* that inspire and verify a Christian interpretation, the first step is to become familiar with the judgments of other scholars diametrically opposed to mine. A selection of such appraisals constitutes exhibit A, to which many similar ones could be added. Their points are central to my discussion, and I encourage the reader to take the time to peruse them before proceeding. I have added emphasis to the quotations, italicizing statements that posit the universal and nondogmatic nature of the *Requiem* text, note a lack of Christian doctrine, and maintain that Brahms's intention was to create a work relevant for all religions and world-views, that is, those positions for which I will propose contradictory readings. Occasionally additional comments from these and other authors will be addressed along the way, mainly to remind the reader that I am not just tilting at windmills. However, space does not permit an exhaustive rebuttal of every such claim that has been made about the work.

Although some of these writers may argue with further subtlety elsewhere in their discussion of the *Requiem* and even concede that certain portions may have Christian significance, the passages below reflect their summary of the overall meaning of the work's text. A few authors share some of my viewpoints, but none have furnished a methodical theological examination of the texts, a thorough assessment of the early critical reception, or a detailed study of early performances. Siegfried Kross refers to the "genuinely Christian essence of the work," and Otto Biba concluded that in the work there is "a message of that certainty of a life after death and of that comfort that can be found in the Christian religion."<sup>3</sup> Robin Leaver has written by far the most important essay that has presented a Christian perspective on the work, and yet it seems not to have slowed the continuous flow of opposing sentiments.<sup>4</sup> Many of the authors quoted in exhibit A are sure of Brahms's intentions and secure in their explanation, inspired by the composer's assumed objective. Most writers are clear that their statements constitute valid interpretations for today's listeners, not just for Brahms or the audiences of his time. Similarly, I seek an understanding of the work that transcends a particular time or place, whether nineteenth-century Germany or twenty-first-century America, though with drastically different results.





## Exhibit A

# Recent Appraisals of the *Requiem* Text

*He had a different intention; he wanted to create a “human Requiem.” It should not be a German or even Protestant counterpart to the Latin Requiem, but stand above all religions, confessions, and worldviews. Brahms attempts to find a basic statement about suffering, death, and resurrection that has validity for all people.*

—Hanns Christian Stekel, *Sehnsucht und Distanz*, 165.

*The texts are striking for avoiding altogether the notion of redemption through Christ, who is not mentioned at all. The religious sentiment is thus more universal—Brahms said it could be called a “human” requiem—than denominational.*

—George S. Bozarth and Walter Frisch, “Brahms, Johannes: 10. Choral Works,” in *Grove Music Online*.

*The language is theistic, but at no point . . . is it explicitly Christian (any more than are Brahms’s other vocal works to biblical compilation-texts). It was not the first requiem in German . . . but it was the first in which a composer had selected and shaped his text, for essentially personal resonances, to speak to a contemporary audience in a shared tongue, transcending the constraints of ritual: a prophetic sermon from individual experience, with universal application.*

—Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms*, 196.

The redemptive death and resurrection of Christ, the central beliefs of Christianity, especially in regard to the deceased, indeed *even the very name of Christ remain unmentioned*, and *we know that this was not done unintentionally*.

—Winfried Kirsch, “Religiöse und liturgische Aspekte bei Brahms und Bruckner,” 148.

Brahms . . . was a humanist and an agnostic, and his requiem was going to express that. . . . He fashioned an inwardly spiritual work, full of echoes of religious music going back hundreds of years, yet there is no bowing to the altar or smell of incense in it. Even if the words come from the Bible, *this was his response to death as a secular, skeptical, modern man.*

—Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, 317.

For Brahms the Bible was but one more great work in the German literary tradition he revered, and could be used to express a highly individualistic religious attitude. . . . The *Requiem* . . . invites diverse interpretations around the axis of its religious meaning. Whereas its fifteen separate biblical texts carry many central articles of Christian belief, *nowhere is Jesus Christ or his resurrection mentioned.* Thus, op. 45 is alternately open to a Christian, a more generally religious, or *even a secular interpretation.* . . . Brahms's approach to religious texts is . . . not irreligious, nor even un-Christian; it simply allows the ideas of the Christian tradition (in this case the Bible) to be treated more freely and *to be put to one's own purposes.*

—Daniel Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit*, 41–42.

The movement from the trouble, sorrow and pointlessness of earthly life to the security, peace, rejoicing and fulfillment of the next, offers not only . . . comfort for the bereaved, but comfort also for all contemplating mortality, not just Protestants, not just Christians, but mankind. *In a move emphasizing this generalisation of undogmatic hope, Brahms omitted reference to Christ by name . . .*

—Robert Pascall, “Historical Perspectives on Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*,” 2.

The choice of familiar words was more an expression of cultural identity than a theological statement. He read the Bible as a repository of experience and wisdom in memorable literary form, rather than as defining the Christian creed. Indeed, *there is no reference to Christ anywhere in the text of the Requiem* . . . He relates his sources to themes of his own and *creates a uniquely personal, non-dogmatic sequence of thoughts.* . . . Though all the texts of the *Requiem* are biblical and exist in a specifically Christian context there, Brahms can be seen considerably to weaken the Christian meanings through his precise selections and juxtapositions . . . He focuses on comfort, hope, reassurance, and reward for personal effort, *conspicuously avoiding judgement, vengeance, religious symbols and—above all—the sacrifice*

*of Christ for human sin.* In fact, he could have chosen the language of German classical or Romantic poetry to express many of these general sentiments . . .

—Michael Musgrave, *Brahms: A German Requiem*, 2, 19, 21.

The title . . . was the gateway to a work that *offered manifold possibilities of identification in its vast openness of religious convictions.* It commended itself as a manifestation of a liberal religiosity that kept itself free of churchly bonds and wanted to be heard and experienced as an expression of personal confession.

—Dieter Rexroth, “Ein deutsches Requiem nach Worten der heiligen Schrift,” 1:306.

Brahms eschewed liturgical function and avoided the traditional Latin words of the Mass for the Dead, choosing his texts instead from various parts of the Bible in Martin Luther’s German translation. He sought thereby to appeal not simply to Catholics—nor only to Protestants, nor to churchgoers in general. Rather, his intended audience was the broader society that shared his native tongue and culture. . . . *The kind of secular humanism displayed in the Requiem* was undoubtedly one reason for its immediate and wide popularity.

—Walter Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*, 36.

*That was the express intention of the composer.* Brahms wanted to serve not only members of a particular confession, also not only Christians, but all people with his music. Though he called it a *German Requiem*, because he used Luther’s Bible for his selection of texts, he would have gladly dispensed with the word “German” to show that the work is *dedicated to the people of all races and religions.*

—Winfried Döbertin, “Johannes Brahms’ *Deutsches Requiem* als religiöses Kunstwerk,” 9.

The words proffer comfort to the bereaved rather than metaphysical sanction for the dead; but *although the work is not Christian in its theology*, its message may be Christian in implication since the keywords of “comfort” and “patience” preserve spiritual values through, and even because of, the work’s unflinching confrontation of death. . . . the words matter as a devotional act, *however much or little doctrinal belief they entail.*

—Wilfrid Mellers, *Celestial Music? Some Masterpieces of European Religious Music*, 164, 168.

He considers the Bible to be poetry and wants to set to music such “sayings” that are meaningful to him, not according to church tradition but according to his own artistic intuition. *He thereby deliberately pursues the intention to free his “poetry” from all confessional fetters and make it accessible to all people. . . . In the whole text of the German Requiem any reference to the Christian interpretation of death and eternal life, to the connection between sin, death, and redemption, and to the person and saving work of Jesus Christ is omitted*, and thus a great many of the Bible quotations are radically re-interpreted or at least remain less meaningful.

—Paul-Gerhard Nohl, *Geistliche Oratorientexte: Entstehung—Kommentar—Interpretation*, 436–37.

*Ein deutsches Requiem* . . . marked the first occasion on which Brahms used sacred texts in an overtly secular fashion. In so doing, what he intended was to provide comfort to the largely secularized audience for whom he wrote.

—Nicole Grimes, *Brahms’s Elegies*, 1.

It gathers in an exemplary way the feeling of *universal human religiosity*, which not only evades the strict liturgical framework but also *avoids the commitment to specifically Christian beliefs*. In the place of the Christian faith bound to worship and congregation, there is the personal confession of the individual, in which an individual religious feeling is paired with the subjective decision about beliefs.

—Christian Martin Schmidt, *Reclams Musikführer: Johannes Brahms*, 195.

*Note: the emphasis in all these quotations has been added*

## Chapter One

# Interpretive Principles

In many discussions of *Ein deutsches Requiem*, the supposition for the interpretation is rarely delineated. Perhaps the writer assumes the reader will share the same strategies for scrutinizing the piece, or the amount of space needed to expound on the analytical procedure is simply unavailable. Because my view of the work is so uncommon, it is vital that every step of my reasoning process be articulated. Since readers and listeners with diverse practices for establishing a reading of a work will likely arrive at varied conclusions, explicitly stating one's premises can make scholarly conversations more profitable.

This opening chapter, then, attempts to demarcate the rationale for my evaluation of the *Requiem's* text. I access a variety of literary theories and examine other scholars' methodologies concerning the work, suggesting where they seem to go awry or employ inconsistent tactics. I also explore Brahms's approach to some of his other choral works and the responses of early audiences and critics as well as modern scholars, who seem to apply a different set of principles to the *Requiem*. The biblical knowledge of those who heard the *Requiem* in its early performances will also be taken into account. Finally, a first look at Brahms's selection of biblical texts explains how it provides interpretive clues for listeners. Altogether, this survey will support the logic for using the biblical context of the *Requiem's* text as an elemental factor in understanding the work.

## Authorial Intent

One possible rationalization for the seemingly undisputed view of the *Requiem's* so-called universality of religious expression is that most current scholars have endeavored to determine what the text meant to Brahms and, as a corollary, what it should therefore mean to us today. This tack is

understandable for studying the music of Brahms, who, like most composers, carefully chose texts that resonated with him for a particular, if not always discernible, reason. Indeed, intriguing connections between Brahms's texts and his personal life have been revealed—what Carol Hess has called “autobiographical allusion” and John Daverio “autobiographical overtones”—in such works as *Rinaldo* (1863–68), the *Alto Rhapsody* (1869), and the *Schicksalslied* (1868–71), all completed shortly after the *Requiem*.<sup>1</sup> A related avenue of research has also provided new insights into biographical connections with Brahms's instrumental works, previously considered model examples of absolute music.

Given the amount of extant source material relating to the composer, scholars rationally strive to ascertain the composer's personal interpretation of his own works. Yet, for the most part, Brahms's intentions remain elusive, despite the potential for such evidence in thousands of letters written by the composer and numerous personal reminiscences by close friends. As Daverio observed, Brahms has a “reputation as one of the most tight-lipped figures in an age whose artists delighted in wearing their hearts on their sleeves,” and he “more often than not hid his innermost feelings, even from his intimate friends, under layers of irony and sarcasm.”<sup>2</sup> Walter Frisch has stated as well that Brahms “was notoriously unforthcoming about most personal subjects, including his own creative processes.”<sup>3</sup> The composer and critic Richard Heuberger (1850–1914), who was a confidant of Brahms in his later years, wrote in his diary after spending an evening with the composer Max Reger (1873–1916) in 1905: “Brahms *never* spoke of his things (or yet only *exceedingly* rarely)—Reger *always* speaks of his things.”<sup>4</sup> Brahms himself admitted to the Bach scholar Philipp Spitta (1841–94): “I do not normally open my mouth of my own accord to speak for my things.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus concentrating primarily on Brahms's intentions is an exasperating and fundamentally doomed mission and possibly does a disservice to the composer, who ordinarily refused to divulge such information. As will be seen, when Brahms's friends who were critics published opinions about the *Requiem* that seem not to agree with what is currently perceived as his intentions, he not only did nothing to chide them or correct their views but expressed joy and satisfaction in their overall comments. For example, when his friend Theodor Billroth (1829–94) shared his thoughts concerning the *Gesang der Parzen*, Brahms responded: “One knows what one wants and how earnestly one has wanted it. Essentially, one should also be able to know what has become of his work. One, however, leaves that for others to say and then gladly trusts their friendly word. So it goes with me this time.”<sup>6</sup> Brahms

certainly had the opportunity to exert influence on how his works were interpreted but freely let individuals come to their own conclusions. Today, though, some scholars seem to believe they can divine Brahms's intentions omnisciently, as demonstrated in several judgments in exhibit A, and therefore forceful pronouncements replace qualified speculation.

Uncovering what Brahms attempted to convey through his chosen texts may be a laudable quest, but it will not illuminate all the implications a work has to offer. Literary theorists W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley notably argued in a critique of what they labeled the "intentional fallacy," that in attempting to fathom the meaning of a work of art, the creator's intent is irrelevant, and the work must be assessed without any external evidence. In other words, according to their formulation, if the creator is effective in carrying out his intentions, then the work will demonstrate its meaning without resorting to biographical information. As Wimsatt and Beardsley summarized it, "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle."<sup>7</sup> Wimsatt later clarified his position: "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging either the meaning or the value of a work of literary art."<sup>8</sup> Peter Kivy argues in a similar vein for what he calls the "intentional axiom," that is "the best and usually the only evidence we have for the artist's intentions is the art work itself."<sup>9</sup>

Along the same lines, Roland Barthes sarcastically commented in his now-classic essay "The Death of the Author" that "the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it," so that "when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained.'"<sup>10</sup> Going a step further, Paul Ricoeur advocated the "semantic autonomy" of the text, which he described as resulting "from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. . . . What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it." Although he warned against dissecting "the text as an authorless entity," he maintained that the author's "intention is often unknown to us, sometimes redundant, sometimes useless, and sometimes even harmful as regards the interpretation of the verbal meaning of his work."<sup>11</sup> Approaching an art work totally divorced from its creator is an extreme hermeneutical method not recommended here, but it does suggest a course correction to a path that has been focused primarily on Brahms's enigmatic objectives.

From a musicological perspective, Richard Taruskin has contended that "any view of hermeneutics that reduces it to intentionalism is a willfully impoverished view."<sup>12</sup> Taruskin commends Mikhail Bakhtin's advice that



“the first task is to understand the work as the author himself understood it, without exceeding the limits of his understanding,” but with the charge that “our understanding can and should be better,” taking “advantage of one’s own position of temporal and cultural outsidersness.”<sup>13</sup> As Taruskin paraphrases Bakhtin, “it is not that we are so much smarter now . . . but that texts contain more than their author can ever know.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, no matter how much a listener is convinced that the composer’s intention is relevant, Brahms’s assumed objectives concerning the *Requiem* must be measured against a critical assessment of his realized creation. As Peter Kivy has reasoned, “Intentions can, needless to say, fail of their goals.”<sup>15</sup> Was Brahms actually successful in creating a work “above all religions, confessions, and worldviews” as Hanns Christian Stekel claims in exhibit A? I hope to demonstrate that, if that was indeed his goal, he failed miserably. Intention does not trump execution.

## Brahms and Christianity

Another closely related issue to Brahms’s intention that shapes analyses of the *Requiem* is his attitude toward Christianity. Although his knowledge of and affection for the Bible is well known, Brahms’s miscellaneous allusions to religious ideas are most often deliberately cryptic or gleefully inflammatory. In a helpful survey of Brahms’s relationship with the Bible, Daniel Beller-McKenna decides that the “few general comments in his letters are mostly unrevealing,” noting that Brahms “liked to show off his knowledge of scripture.”<sup>16</sup> In a comparable overview, Stekel concludes that Brahms sometimes wrote in a mock biblical style and quoted or paraphrased scripture in his letters, but never as part of an argument in a religious discussion. Most significantly, Brahms’s “references to the Bible usually appear in a joking context,” which Stekel believes is primarily due to “an essential aspect of Brahms’s humor . . . : the ironizing of things that are personally important to him.”<sup>17</sup> In his extensive study on Brahms and religion, Jan Brachmann remarks on “the inconsistency or incoherence of the image of the ‘religious’ Brahms.”<sup>18</sup>

Both Stekel and Robin Leaver, among others, have examined Brahms’s religious instruction as a child in Hamburg.<sup>19</sup> Brahms himself was pleased to share with his friends information about his biblical training and expertise. While listing his qualifications to be a godfather, for example, Brahms maintained to his friend Adolf Schubring (1817–93): “I was baptized, memorized the catechism according to Luther, also read the Bible diligently.”<sup>20</sup> Brahms

famously told a friend later in life: “We North Germans crave the Bible and do not let a day go by without it. In my study I can pick out my Bible even in the dark!”<sup>21</sup>

Several letters between Brahms and the singer Julius Stockhausen (1826–1906) when he was asked to be godfather for one of Stockhausen’s sons demonstrate Brahms’s knowledge of church tradition and praxis as well as his penchant for theological humor. Even though he considered himself “not quite worthy” for such a Christian office, he assured Stockhausen: “I am not uninformed in what concerns baptism and can perhaps give you . . . very good advice.” Drawing from Luther’s popular *Tischreden* (Table Talk), a copy of which Brahms owned, he could offer the ruling that warm or cold water could be used in baptism (“water is water,” said Luther) or, for that matter, if necessary, beer or milk. He boasted: “Our theologians forget many things and you can yourself turn to me confidently in doubtful cases!”<sup>22</sup> When told the child would be baptized on Easter Monday, Brahms expounded on how, in the early church, baptism was observed only at Easter and Pentecost. He also quoted from a church ordinance from 1570, though he wondered if it could answer questions for those living in “heathen” (*heidnischen*) Berlin, Stockhausen’s current home.<sup>23</sup> Stockhausen held up his part of the repartee by quoting from the bass aria of Bach’s cantata for the Feast of John the Baptist (*Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam*, BWV 7) and encouraging Brahms to respond with another learned answer based “on Bach and Luther’s sayings.”<sup>24</sup> Brahms was definitely proud of his biblical knowledge and his youthful training as a Lutheran, and he never tried to distance himself from it. It can be reasonably acknowledged that whatever Brahms’s intentions were, he knew exactly what the verses he chose for the *Requiem* meant in their traditional Christian interpretation, and he chose them anyway.

Even so, Brahms avoided a clear enunciation of his current religious views. He made enough statements to confirm that he was doctrinally unconventional, however. According to the not always reliable testimony of Brahms’s friend and early biographer Max Kalbeck (1850–1921), late in his life Brahms admitted “that he neither at the time he wrote the ‘Requiem’ nor even then believed in the immortality of the soul.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, to Heuberger Brahms said: “Yet we can’t believe in immortality on the other side. The only true immortality lies in one’s children.”<sup>26</sup> Significantly, most of the allegations about Brahms’s lack of belief are usually reported late in his life by others or quite conveniently after his death. On the other hand, Brahms’s composer friend Heinrich von Herzogenberg (1843–1900) wrote about Brahms after his death, describing “his own deeply religious, however

church-free, way of feeling” and regarding the *Requiem* “the work of such a quintessentially Protestant and deeply religious man.”<sup>27</sup> Possibly one of the tenderest comments Brahms made about his religious belief was in a letter to his friend Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904), the distinguished Viennese music critic, concerning the festivities related to his being named an honorary citizen of his native Hamburg in 1889. He recounted: “My adventure was entirely too lovely and agreeable . . . However, I am alarmed to see my telegram to the mayor in print! It sounds altogether foolish, ‘the greatest beauty, which can only come from human beings’—as if apart from that I had been thinking of eternal salvation! But our dear Lord did not occur to me at all in that connection.”<sup>28</sup> It can be difficult to parse Brahms’s sense of sarcasm and irony in relation to religious topics, and although he was obviously trying to be humorous, his references to “eternal salvation” and “our dear Lord,” though somewhat of a stock phrase at the time, sounds a bit more genuine than usual. Beller-McKenna, in his examination of the interrelatedness between religion and nationalism in the music of Brahms, prudently recommends a middle road for Brahms, concluding that for “Brahms and his German contemporaries . . . it was possible to be ‘religious’ in a broad, nondogmatic sense, without holding to the particular tenets of Christianity.” Still, he admits that “there is nothing to suggest that Brahms ever betrayed that formative religious training.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Leaver proposes that “Brahms was like many of his contemporaries, post-Enlightenment Protestants who retained a Biblical spirituality that was not closely circumscribed by the specifics of dogmatic theology.”<sup>30</sup> More quotations and observations about Brahms’s faith or seeming lack thereof could be presented without reaching a definitive conclusion.

Even if Brahms’s precise theological stances could be fully and correctly ascertained, should they be the primary guide to interpret the *Requiem*? After all, there can be a dissonance between a composer’s own religious, philosophical, and moral affinities and his artistic creations. Concerning Schubert’s selection of texts, Brian Newbould asserts that a composer may choose a text “on the basis of his artistic temperament and his perception of his own technical strengths and inclinations rather than on whether it incorporates his own attitudes, values, [and] religious beliefs.” Newbould asks an important question: “But does an ostensibly wholehearted response to a text necessarily arise from personal conviction rather than from a will to create a compelling work of art?”<sup>31</sup> Did Brahms, then, have to affirm each of the texts he chose for the *Requiem* in order to provide artistically credible settings of them? Did he have to believe in the “cruel gods” depicted in *Gesang der Parzen* or that

the title character of *Rinaldo* could be enchanted by the sorceress Armida? Reinhard Strohm has neatly summarized Ruth Smith's advice in her groundbreaking work on Handel's oratorios: "We cannot be sure that the texts set by Handel either define or articulate what he himself believed in."<sup>32</sup> We can say the same for Brahms. Ultimately, the issue is not what Brahms believed but what the words of the *Requiem* in and of themselves convey to the listener. Although Brahms may not have believed in the "immortality of the soul," an opinion voiced privately to friends, it would be impossible to determine that from his choice of texts for the *Requiem*.

Hanslick, who was raised in the Catholic tradition but was not observant as an adult, offers some valuable advice in this area. He was admittedly not particularly interested in music composed specifically for the church, but he wrote insightfully about a variety of sacred music while voicing his own conservative tastes. In comments about several works, he made keen observations about the difference between critiquing a piece of sacred music for its aesthetic qualities and attempting to discern the authenticity of the composer's faith. In a caustic review of Liszt's *Gran Mass* in 1858, for example, Hanslick declared that "judging the inner piety of an artist is a very difficult, dubious enterprise. Aesthetic criticism is not an inquisition. One sticks strictly to the work and remains conscious of the principle that the ecclesial nature of a work of art and the subjective faith of the artist are two very different things."<sup>33</sup> In 1879 he harshly criticized the same work, while at least kindly assuming Liszt's earnest religious devotion: "We do not doubt for a moment the individual piety and religiosity of the composer, but for our part we are not able to find anything of the transfigured peace and the healing power of prayer in a music that rouses all the confusion of human passions, a drama of earthly unrest and inner strife."<sup>34</sup>

In reviewing the highly dramatic *Requiem* of Giuseppe Verdi in 1875, Hanslick returned to the same issues and reused an incisive epigram:

The "churchliness" of the Verdi *Requiem* is the first of its qualities to invite criticism. And yet there are few subjects about which it is so risky to pass judgment. The subjective religiousness of the artist must be left out of the question; criticism is not an inquisition. At the same time, a composer's faith is no guarantee for the religious dignity of the work, and vice versa. Can one doubt the piety of Mozart and Haydn? Certainly not. And yet a good deal of their church music strikes one as very, very worldly. Compared with the festive country-fair atmosphere of many a "Gloria" of these masters, and the operatic flourishes of many a "Benedictus" and "Agnus Dei," Verdi's *Requiem* sounds holy.<sup>35</sup>

In the case of each composer mentioned above (Liszt, Verdi, Mozart, and Haydn), Hanslick was concerned that the music did not properly convey religious devotion even though he was confident about the artist's sincere religious conviction. And as he suggested through the phrase "vice versa," a musical work could express devotional sentiments even though the creator lacked faith. Hanslick makes clear that the composer's own credo is not the issue at stake, but what the music itself communicates. It may be tempting to speculate about Brahms's beliefs as we experience and analyze the *Requiem*, but Hanslick wisely cautions us that we are to be critics, not inquisitors.

### *Sola Scriptura*

Whatever Brahms's relationship with Christianity might have been, he nevertheless chose only passages from the Bible to create his *Requiem*. To paraphrase a standard oath, the *Requiem* text may not be the whole Bible, but it is nothing but the Bible. It would be difficult if not technically impossible to assemble a collection of scriptural quotations for the purpose of refuting or negating biblical teaching without willful and misleading alterations, additions, or omissions. Historically, participants in theological controversies, for example, have been unable to differentiate their views by quoting scripture but have had to resort to extrabiblical terminology to clarify their discrete positions.<sup>36</sup> Brahms, however, left his biblical quotations intact. The few exceedingly minor changes seem to fill a poetical, contextual, or musical function, or they simply update the three-hundred-year-old translation; they do not alter the meaning in any theological or doctrinal manner.<sup>37</sup> As Brahms confessed to Karl Reinthaler (1822–96), who prepared the Bremen premiere of the *Requiem*, he could not "challenge or strike out the text of [his] revered bards, not even a 'from henceforth.'"<sup>38</sup> For whatever reason, Brahms was faithful to his chosen texts and thus invites listeners to share that same fidelity.

Brahms himself has misdirected scholars by some of his subversive quips relating to his search for texts. Perhaps his most notorious remark occurred in a letter written more than a decade after the composition of the *Requiem* to his trusted confidante Elisabeth von Herzogenberg (1847–92), wife of the composer Heinrich von Herzogenberg, that he could not find suitable choral texts because those in the Bible were "not heathenish enough" for him, a line frequently quoted to prove Brahms's disapproval of Christianity.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, he joked with her husband about his *Vier ernste Gesänge*: "I shall have a trifle

to send soon, which may cause you to attack my unchristian principles.”<sup>40</sup> I would argue, however, that Brahms’s pursuit of “heathen” texts in the Bible is misleading, because such texts are non-existent. To be sure, the Bible records the full gamut of human emotions and actions—some commendable, others contemptible—for it is not only the account of God’s interaction with humanity but also humanity’s unvarnished response to God and to the trials of living in a fallen world. Even some of the most devout believers have taken their turn at voicing to God their anger or disappointment. A text expressing rage or despair is not unbiblical merely because it describes the reactions of real and imperfect people in distress. That truthfulness in exposing humanity’s weaknesses as well as its strengths is one of the unique features of the Bible in the genre of religious texts. John N. Oswalt has observed that “biblical characters are not depicted as semidivine, representative beings,” and the Bible “is remarkably frank about its heroes’ failures and defeats.” Furthermore, its “accounts do not glory in the failures of the heroes, as is the case in the Greek heroic literature. The failures are simply tragic.”<sup>41</sup> The result is an honest, full-dimensional portrayal of individuals that offers exactly the kind of vivid character that Mendelssohn was searching for when he chose Elijah as the protagonist of his second oratorio, a prophet that was, in the composer’s words to his librettist, Julius Schubring (1806–89), “energetic and zealous, but also stern, wrathful, and gloomy.” Mendelssohn later amplified to Schubring his belief in the Bible’s authentic illustration of humanity: “The personages should act and speak as if they were living beings—for Heaven’s sake let them not be a musical picture, but a real world, such as you find in every chapter of the Old Testament.”<sup>42</sup> A cynical text can, in fact, be a biblical one, whether it is Elijah in the wilderness crying “It is enough” (I Kings 19:4) or Christ on the cross agonizing “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). As will become clearer as we proceed through this chapter, even the most pessimistic text from the Bible will be heard by listeners within the context of the full range of biblical teaching, knowing that, in these examples, Elijah eventually ascended triumphantly to heaven and Christ was soon miraculously resurrected. Significantly, Brahms admitted that he failed in his search for heathen texts in the Bible, and the *Requiem* itself assuredly does not contain any verses that could be categorized as such.

Despite a hallowed Lutheran tradition of incorporating chorale texts and newly written poetry in sacred works, nineteenth-century German composers seem to have been increasingly drawn to biblical texts. Howard Smither, in his survey of nineteenth-century German oratorios, detected that oratorio librettos on New Testament subjects after mid-century demonstrated a “new

preference for the more sober, biblical language,” which he attributes to several factors, including an increased historicism in music and the influence of several model works that relied heavily or solely on biblical texts: Handel’s *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt*, Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* and *Christmas Oratorio*, and Mendelssohn’s *St. Paul* and *Elijah*.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, comments by several critics regarding *Messiah* and the *St. Matthew Passion*, the latter as revived by Mendelssohn in 1829, are telling in their reaction to the impact of biblical texts. The distinguished writer and critic Friedrich Rochlitz (1769–1842), although incorrectly assuming that Handel compiled his own libretto, praised *Messiah*’s dependence on scripture, proclaiming: “[It is] not man’s word, not even the most exquisite and most beautiful . . . but purely God’s Word . . . simple and sublime as we find it in the holy books.”<sup>44</sup> Mendelssohn’s friend Adolf Bernhard Marx (1795–1866), an influential critic and later the most significant music theorist of his time, claimed in his autobiography that his conversion to Christianity from Judaism was partly inspired by *Messiah*, which stimulated his own “pleasant and eager study of the Bible,” and throughout his life he was occupied with “the poetic sublimity and deep wisdom of the Book of Books.”<sup>45</sup> In 1829 he gushed about the *St. Matthew Passion*: “What power lies in [Bach’s] absolute adherence to the words of the Bible, and the returns on this faithfulness to the word are riches the equal of which can be found in no other musical work.” The poet and music critic Ludwig Rellstab (1799–1860), also writing on the *Passion*, maintained that the music had been “lifted ever higher by the power and gravity of the words” and believed that the biblical text was “the most important part of the work.”<sup>46</sup> Mendelssohn had jettisoned six chorales and fourteen arias and ariosos for his performance, which in turn gave more prominence to the biblical text. Jeffrey Sposato observes that the deleted solos were “deeply immersed in Pietist theology and its focus on an intimate one-on-one relationship with the redeemer (an unfashionable concept in early nineteenth-century Berlin . . .).”<sup>47</sup> Michael Marissen agrees that the arias were “textually out of date, in contrast to the chorales and biblical accounts, considered timeless.”<sup>48</sup> When Mendelssohn compiled a libretto about Moses for his friend Marx a few years after the *St. Matthew Passion* revival, he told his friend Karl Klingemann that he was “exceptionally pleased” with it: “I have assembled it completely from biblical passages, and the only thing I have composed is: ‘In the evening, however,’ or ‘he said.’ That’s why it’s so beautiful.”<sup>49</sup>

Hanslick repeatedly complained about the pietistic texts in the arias of Bach’s cantatas and other large-scale works, like those Mendelssohn had



omitted from the *St. Matthew Passion*. In a review of a partial performance of the *Christmas Oratorio* performed by the Vienna Singakademie under Brahms's direction (March 20, 1864), he stated: "The mawkish pietistic lyrics . . . [are] repugnant to our feelings. This eternal sighing and pining for the 'heavenly bridegroom' . . . make it a bit sour." However, when the narrative of the evangelist returns with "the simple, meaningful Bible words," he remarks: "It is like letting fresh morning air into a dull overheated room."<sup>50</sup> Hanslick's Catholic background did not help him appreciate the inherent Lutheranism of Bach's poetic texts, whereas Brahms's reliance on scripture alone surely made the *Requiem* more appealing.

The unalloyed biblical text of the *Requiem* is unquestionably one reason for the work's endurance in the repertoire. Some of the most esteemed choral works still performed today that do not set a liturgical text are compilations of scripture, such as Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *St. Paul* and *Elijah*. Works based on new poetry often do not stand the test of time with the public—witness most of Handel's other oratorios.<sup>51</sup> As early as 1887 a Vienna correspondent to the *Musical World* claimed that "of all Brahms's great choral works, the 'Deutsche Requiem' [was] the only one which [had] so far taken root in popular appreciation at Vienna."<sup>52</sup>

Brahms had several options at his disposal other than a compilation of scripture if his goal had been to devise a nondogmatic, universal libretto. The inclusion of passages from sources other than the Bible, especially the sacred texts of other religions, would have been an excellent starting point. Diluting the text with just one verse from the Qur'ān (a text he eventually owned),<sup>53</sup> a hymn from the Rig Veda, an aphorism from an admired philosopher, or a cherished German folk proverb<sup>54</sup> would have introduced conflicting ideas to the text, requiring listeners to reconcile differing opinions regarding death and an afterlife. For example, Mahler's combination of the Pentecost hymn "Veni, Creator Spiritus" and its clear Trinitarian theology with the closing scene of *Faust* in his Eighth Symphony raises important issues about meaning, because he juxtaposes texts with different perspectives, what John Williamson has called "two seemingly antithetical poetic elements," igniting decades of critical debate.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps most harshly, Hans Mayer declared the combination of texts an "absurdity—both theologically and poetically." *A World Requiem* (1921) by the British composer John Foulds (1880–1939) provides another example. Its libretto draws mostly on biblical texts (with two verses in common with Brahms's *Requiem*: 1 Corinthians 15:55 and Revelation 14:13) with several overt references to Christ, as well as excerpts from the Latin Requiem and John



Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Yet it also mentions the Elysium of Greek mythology, quotes from the writings of the fifteenth-century Hindu mystic Kabir, and contains a call to "Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi, Mohammedan" to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Wood documents how the work "attempts to mix religious traditions still within a largely Christian context . . . to create a more global awareness." In one movement he explains the usage of "the word 'Om' (spelled 'Aum' in the score)—the mystical Sanskrit sound sacred to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism."<sup>57</sup> The work's blend of Eastern religions and Christianity exhibits the composer's commitment to theosophy and, according to the composer's program note, his "aspiration to produce a work which might belong to many nations and creeds."<sup>58</sup> Despite its primary dependence on Christian theology in its text, the occasional bow to universalism easily negates a specifically Christian perspective.

To be sure, such compilations from disparate sources became common only after Brahms and have been prevalent in recent years, yet there were precedents for texts that could champion a universal message. For instance, Mozart was commissioned to set a cantata text (*Eine kleine deutsche Kantate*, K. 619) for the use of a masonic lodge that explicitly names multiple deities in its opening lines:

You who honor the creator of the infinite universe,  
calling him Jehovah or God, calling him Fu or Brahma, listen!  
Listen to words from the trumpet of the Lord of all!<sup>59</sup>

The text by Franz Heinrich Ziegenhagen (1753–1806), a Freemason as well as a utopian socialist influenced by Rousseau, reflects the masonic "belief in the 'Supreme Architect' and in the unity of all religions," according to Katharine Thomson.<sup>60</sup> As a more famous example, Friedrich Schiller's "An die Freude" as set by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony mingles ambiguous allusions to Greek antiquity, Christian themes, and Enlightenment philosophy and has thereby initiated an endless array of explanations. Leo Treitler has cautioned that the work "*demand*s interpretation," even as it constantly defies our attempts to explain it.<sup>61</sup> For another possibility, Brahms could have drawn from numerous vague pantheistic texts like those set by Schubert, such as *Gott im Ungewitter* (God in the Thunderstorm), D. 985 or *Gott der Weltschöpfer* (God, the Creator of the World), D. 986. Glenn Stanley describes the defining features of the pantheism in these texts as "the location and musical representation of a divinity in the sublimity of nature."<sup>62</sup>

Brahms could have explored various options for his text selection, but he did not, depending solely on the Bible. When modern scholars view the *Requiem's* text as universal, perhaps it only appears that way to those steeped in Western culture. As will be seen in the following chapter, the theology espoused in the *Requiem* has little in common with other religious traditions. If Brahms had set nothing but selections from the Qur'ān, even if expressly devoid of doctrine, would most Western listeners consider it an undogmatic text? Practically speaking, devout believers of any faith are unlikely to be interested in—if not fiercely opposed to—the use of sacred texts of another religion for devotional purposes. Brahms's compendium of verses from a single sacred text is automatically endowed with a unified theological perspective and immediately encourages the listener to evaluate the text in relation to that unique religious tradition. As will be seen later, the choice of biblical texts rather than a liturgical one also identifies the *Requiem* as a peculiarly Protestant work, placing it in the context of one of the foundational principles of the Reformation, *sola scriptura* (scripture alone).<sup>63</sup>

### Intertextuality

Given the *Requiem's* reliance on a single textual source, the literary concept of intertextuality is especially germane to an interpretation of it. Coined by Julia Kristeva, who was influenced by the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin, the term has been “defined so variously” according to Graham Allen that it is “in danger of meaning nothing more than whatever each particular critic wishes it to mean.”<sup>64</sup> Most basically, it proposes that an understanding of any text is influenced by the author's use of and allusions to other texts—whether deliberate or unconscious, as homage or parody or points in between—as well as the reader's knowledge of those identical texts or any others previously experienced. Michel Foucault described the process as one in which a book “is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.”<sup>65</sup> Or as Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein instruct: “Meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated by meanings or codes suggested to the writer and the reader by other texts.”<sup>66</sup>

Concerning examples of intertextuality, Gubrium and Holstein state that a “considerable portion of the modern Western literary canon is beholden for its meanings to biblical and Shakespearean texts.” As a result, “knowledge of Shakespeare and the Bible informs much of how modern literature is written

and received.” Interestingly, as Hannibal Hamlin has observed, the writings of Shakespeare contain allusions to the Bible that are “frequent, deliberate, and significant,” and he claims that “knowledge of the Bible is necessary fully to understand Shakespeare’s plays.”<sup>67</sup> There is hardly a clearer example of intertextuality and the role of biblical texts in the Western canon than the *Requiem*, with its entire text drawn from the Bible.<sup>68</sup> In the case of the *Requiem*, the Bible serves as an “intertext,” what Michael Riffaterre has defined as “one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance.”<sup>69</sup> Those who have prior knowledge of the Bible as the textual source of the *Requiem* will access it as they attempt to make sense of Brahms’s compilation of biblical verses, while those unexposed to the intertext will find their interpretive task challenging. Although the theory of intertextuality can be sophisticated and dense, it explains what average readers automatically do without conscious effort.

Perhaps a non-biblical illustration will be helpful. Composers intuitively understand that when they set a well-known text or an excerpt from one they can exclude essential information from a narrative based on their prospective audience’s knowledge of the original source. To take an obvious example, numerous composers set extracts from Goethe’s *Faust*, a sprawling work filled with poetic treasures that functioned as a vast resource for nineteenth-century composers; it became “the secular Bible of the Germans,” as the poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) designated it.<sup>70</sup> The dramatic backdrop of Schubert’s acclaimed setting of “Gretchen am Spinnrade,” for example, was familiar to nineteenth-century German audiences, so it would seem absurd to declare that since Faust’s name is not mentioned in the text, the identity of Gretchen’s fixation remained a mystery to those listeners.<sup>71</sup> In Schumann’s *Scenen aus Goethes Faust*, for another example, the character of Mephistopheles is marginalized, and the wager between him and Faust, the crux of the entire drama, is totally absent. As Nicholas Marston has judged, the significance of Faust’s “self-proclaimed death sentence . . . is unintelligible from the context of Schumann’s composition alone; it requires detailed knowledge of both parts of Goethe’s drama.”<sup>72</sup> Schumann’s decision not to portray the wager does not negate its relevance for his version of the story. Listeners, then or now, must know or seek Goethe’s original narrative if they are to understand Schumann’s work. In a similar vein but from a different area of literature, Carol Dougherty states that, concerning Greek myths, “precisely because everyone already knows the stories, they are always only partially retold,” stressing that the “elements of a myth that are omitted are just as significant as those that are included.”<sup>73</sup>

In regard to understanding biblical excerpts, an oft-quoted axiom among theologians is “a text without a context is a pretext for a proof-text.” A proof-text in biblical studies is a solitary verse used to support a particular doctrinal position. Individual verses are commonly employed in this fashion, but the term proof-text usually carries a negative connotation, implying the premeditated and misleading use of a verse plucked from its surroundings to buttress an otherwise indefensible interpretation. One introductory text to biblical hermeneutics summarizes this methodology: “The scriptural texts are valued more for their short, epigrammatic use of several key words that coincide with the topic or contemporary subject chosen than for the evidence that they actually bring from their own context.” The textbook contends that the practice “often relies on a naive reading of the text,” and, because it ignores context, as a basis for scholarly study it is “completely inadequate.”<sup>74</sup> Listeners with little or no biblical knowledge may approach the verses in the *Requiem* this way, assuming their original context is either benignly irrelevant or intentionally disregardable. When detached from their biblical setting, Brahms’s selections do not intimate a willful misreading or an unorthodox viewpoint, but knowledge of their background is helpful in determining their exact meaning, which may occasionally be unclear in isolation. Average readers and listeners instinctively consult or search for the intertext in most situations, but novices in scriptural studies may need to purposely cultivate an emphasis on context to engage in serious biblical scholarship.

Church congregations, however, have long been trained to recognize the context of scriptural passages such as those chosen by Brahms. In lectionary readings from the Old and New Testaments, no introductions are given to provide the setting, and the name of Jesus or other individuals is not necessarily supplied if a passage begins *in media res*. The worshiper already knows the background or is able to deduce it. Likewise, the *Spruchmotette* of the Lutheran tradition that set a single verse or two from a longer pericope, such as the Gospel lesson, offered biblical excerpts with no prefatory material.<sup>75</sup> Craig Westendorf explains that these motets were “based on the most succinct, summarizing texts,” or “Kernsprüche.”<sup>76</sup> To take one of many examples, the celebrated motet *Saul, Saul was verfolgst du mich?* by Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) sets the words of Jesus to Saul on the road to Damascus as recounted in Acts 9:4–5 (the words set musically are italicized): “und er fiel auf die Erde und hörte eine Stimme, die sprach zu ihm: *Saul, Saul, was verfolgst du mich?* Er aber sprach: Herr, wer bist du? Der Herr sprach: Ich bin Jesus, den du verfolgst. *Es wird dir schwer werden, wider den Stachel zu lecken*” (and he fell to the earth and heard a voice that spoke to him: *Saul,*

*Saul, why do you persecute me?* He, however, said: Lord, who are you? The Lord said: I am Jesus, whom you persecute. *It will be hard for you to kick against the pricks*).<sup>77</sup> As typical for such a motet, Schütz provides only the heart of the passage, what Germans called the “Kern,” the core or essence, with no introductory material setting the stage and no identification of the speaker. He sets only the words of Jesus, but the listener is expected to know the context, identify the person speaking, and understand the significance of the passage.<sup>78</sup> As will be shown in the final chapter, Brahms knew this particular motet by Schütz: he studied it, performed it, and alluded to it in his *Requiem*. Although modern listeners may not be familiar with the passage, musicologists dutifully supply the context to those unaware of it. The piece has become a standard example in surveys of music history. Sarah Fuller, for instance, in her anthology of early music for classroom use, states plainly: “Schütz sets only the words of Christ—the audience would have known the dramatic context.”<sup>79</sup> The thought never seems to cross the minds of the respected authors of college music history texts and compilers of anthologies to deny the work is about Christ solely because his name is not mentioned in the text, as other scholars do when discussing the *Requiem*.

Another early work that requires its listeners to know the biblical context is J. S. Bach’s *Actus tragicus*, BWV 106 (also known as *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* [God’s time is the very best time]), which had been published in 1830 and was regularly performed in nineteenth-century Germany. It was frequently considered a kindred work to the *Requiem* with its biblical text that emphasizes the inevitability of death and the joy that awaits the believer. Leaver classifies Schütz’s *Musikalische Exequien* and the *Actus tragicus* as examples of Lutheran funerary music and precursors to the *Requiem*.<sup>80</sup> For this cantata Bach includes seven different biblical passages but excludes newly written poetry that was traditional for the arias. Eric Chafe notes that the “solos, instead of serving as immediate expressions of the idealized, contemporary Christian, represent scriptural personages; knowledge of the original context is often essential to an understanding of their religious meaning.”<sup>81</sup> One such personage is Christ, who is signified by his words on the cross to the thief, “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43), but who is not otherwise identified.

One of the most popular sacred choral works in nineteenth-century Germany, Handel’s *Messiah*, absolutely demands previous knowledge of the intertext. (Its similarities with the *Requiem* will be examined later.) In his substantial essay on *Messiah* in which he praised the work’s use of biblical text, Rochlitz stated that everything was communicated in “compact core

sayings” (*gediegenen Kernsprüchen*).<sup>82</sup> The music historian Carl Hermann Bitter (1813–85), in his study of the oratorio genre published in 1872, testified to the necessary involvement of the audience while listening to *Messiah*: “I need not repeat to you that this text discusses the mystery of the redemption of mankind through the divine mission of Christ mostly through prophetic and apocalyptic allusions, that the actual historical matters therein are only very sparsely provided, and that rather the actual facts of the matter must be supplemented by the listener from within.”<sup>83</sup> The Handel scholar Donald Burrows affirms that the use of vague scriptural excerpts in *Messiah* assumes the audience has had previous acquaintance with the Bible in order to grasp the libretto’s meaning:

The chain of events in Part Two is narrated so obliquely, through allusive biblical references carrying very little direct description, that it would be incomprehensible to an audience without prior knowledge of the subject: the listener must be, if not necessarily a believer, at least well versed in the scriptural accounts of events between Maundy Thursday and Whit Sunday, and needs to know something of their conventional theological interpretation.<sup>84</sup>

Inexplicably, the attention to biblical context required to understand the scriptural settings of Schütz, Bach, and Handel—composers revered and emulated by Brahms—is discounted or dismissed when confronting the *Requiem*.

By drawing on a variety of biblical sources and by generally quoting relatively short fragments, much as Charles Jennens did in his libretto for *Messiah*, Brahms requires the listener not only to infer the context of the original quotations but also to search for coherence among the various texts. Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has contended that when there are “gaps in the text,” what he terms the “elements of indeterminacy,” the “reader will strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern.”<sup>85</sup> More specifically in regard to intertextuality, Riffaterre argues that the perception by readers that “something is missing from the text,” such as “gaps that need to be filled” and “references to an as yet unknown referent,” signals the presence of an intertext. Then the “urge to understand compels readers to look to the intertext to fill out the text’s gaps” and “spell out its implications.” As will be seen, this consultation of the intertext allows, for example, listeners to identify who is speaking even though they remain unnamed and encourages them to construe theological terms, such as redemption and resurrection, as they are characterized in the original source.

Ultimately, Riffaterre claims that “the recovery of the intertext is an imperative and inevitable process.”<sup>86</sup>

## Brahms and Context

Even if we accept that the concept of intertextuality is relevant to our understanding of the *Requiem*, can we really assume that Brahms would want his audience to know the background of his chosen biblical texts? Virtually every piece Brahms composed for choir and orchestra in the next decade or so after the *Requiem* has something to teach us about how to approach it. Examining how Brahms offered contextual clues to his listeners, how early critics and audiences responded to the works, and how modern scholars interpret them can help answer that question.

After completing the *Requiem*, Brahms finished a work begun earlier, his dramatic cantata *Rinaldo* (1863–68), a setting of a poem by Goethe adapted from Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581). Believing that the circumstances of the original scenario were crucial for listeners but concerned that they would be unfamiliar to many of them, Brahms had a twelve-line excerpt from Tasso printed in German in the program for the 1869 premiere as well as in the published score to establish the setting.<sup>87</sup> Despite that effort, Brahms was troubled that audiences seemed not to understand the context. He bemoaned to his friend Philipp Spitta, who himself had raised issues about the opening of the work, that “the beginning of *Rinaldo* appears to come as a surprise to people and to be ineffectual.” He thought he had conveyed the necessary setting to “people at the performance by having a verse from Tasso printed before the text.” But he conceded: “It goes without saying that I have now noticed, from the reaction, that my realization [of this idea] may well have misfired and bears all the blame.”<sup>88</sup> Spitta agreed: “I fear that the first impression will always be bewildering to the impartial listener, since he believes the music is not in accordance with the text”; he recommended a brief scenic description in addition to the verses by Tasso.<sup>89</sup> In an early guide to Brahms’s choral works, the musicologist Hermann Kretzschmar (1848–1924) observed that for *Rinaldo* there were “many unprepared listeners.”<sup>90</sup>

When Hanslick wrote about *Rinaldo* in 1883, fourteen years after its premiere in Vienna, he stated that the work had almost disappeared in that city despite what he perceived as its popularity in northern Germany and along the Rhine. He found it difficult to warm to the work himself and thought that “the root of the evil [lay] first in Goethe’s poem, whose deceptive,



apparently musical merits [had] lured the composer into a dangerous undertaking,” and indeed that “the poem [might] be hardly known.” He had the impression that compared with the simple design of Goethe’s *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*, published in the same collection as *Rinaldo*, the latter’s “proceedings remain[ed] for the most part unintelligible to the audience,” which was “uncertain and helpless.”<sup>91</sup>

More recent writers have identified the same problem, including Hans Gál, who observed in his biography of Brahms, “The Goethe text . . . suffers from too many allusions to Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*. The reader is either well acquainted with that work, or the allusions are incomprehensible.”<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Daverio, in an essay on *Rinaldo*, claimed: “An informed reaction to Brahms’s cantata is predicated not only on an understanding of its text but also on a familiarity with the sixteenth-century epic on which Goethe based his poem. While Brahms may have assumed that his audience knew the earlier text, such an assumption cannot be made today.”<sup>93</sup>

Brahms had a similar concern for preparing the audience for *Nänie* (1880–81), a setting of Schiller’s ode that referenced figures from Greek mythology—Orpheus, Eurydice, Adonis, Achilles, and Thetis—without identifying their names. Brahms’s friend Billroth wrote to another mutual friend, the art historian Wilhelm Lübke (1826–93), about the challenging text in general: “It would be unfair to demand from a concert audience, even if it were entirely composed of musicians and the best dilettantes, that it should be immediately enraptured by such compositions. Let us be honest! Have we not also had to read some of the most beautiful poems of Schiller and Goethe again and again before we were really thrilled by them.”<sup>94</sup> At the 1881 premiere, to make the cantata’s text more accessible, it appeared in the program with annotations identifying the unnamed protagonists as well as the proper names in the text: Zeus, Aphrodite, and Orcus (fig. 1.1). Constantin Floros believes this was a necessary action because “the plethora of mythological allusions and encryptions is . . . bewildering to the layman.”<sup>95</sup> The annotations, in fact, are 25 percent longer than the poem they explain; they were reproduced with slight modifications in the complete works edition. No such footnotes were deemed necessary for the *Requiem* text.

For the *Alto Rhapsody* (1869), Brahms identified the source of the text on the score as “Fragment aus Göthe’s Harzreise im Winter,” indicating that he had set an excerpt from one of Goethe’s odes. A collection of Goethe’s poems published in England a few years later in 1875 claimed that the odes were “peculiarly sublime and profound,” but had to be “studied rather than cursorily read.” Moreover, “the rugged and allegorical style” of some of them,



Dienstag den 6. December 1881  
im grossen Saal der Tonhalle:  
**EXTRA-CONCERT**  
der  
**Tonhallegesellschaft**  
unter Mitwirkung von  
**Dr. JOHANNES BRAHMS.**

**PROGRAMM.**

**I. Abtheilung:**

1. Akademische Fest-Ouverture, op. 80.
2. Concert für Klavier und Orchester, Nr. 2, in B-dur (Manuscript).  
(Allegro moderato. Allegro passionato. Andante. Allegretto grazioso.)
3. «Nenie», von Schiller, für Chor und Orchester, op. 82.

**II. Abtheilung:**

4. Sinfonie für grosses Orchester, Nr. 2, in D-dur, op. 73.  
(Allegro non troppo. Adagio non troppo. Allegretto. Allegro con spirito.)

*Sämmtliche Compositionen sind von Dr. Johannes Brahms.*

Die Klavierpartie von Nr. 2 ausgeführt vom **Componisten**, Nr. 3 und 4 unter Leitung  
des **Componisten**.

Der Concertchor ist gebildet aus verehrlichen Mitgliedern des Gemischten Chors Zürich  
sowie des Männerchors Zürich.

Öeffnung der Thüren halb 7 Uhr. Beginn 7 Uhr. Ende gegen 9 Uhr.

Figure 1.1. Program for the premiere of Brahms's *Nänie* (spelled *Nenie* here), December 6, 1881, Zurich. The verso contains the text with extensive annotations explaining the veiled references to Greek mythology (Courtesy, Musikabteilung, Zentralbibliothek Zürich).

## Nenie<sup>1)</sup> von Schiller.

Auch das Schöne muss sterben, das Menschen und Götter bezwinget!

Nicht die eherne Brust rührt es des stygischen Zeus<sup>2)</sup>.

Einmal nur erweichte die Liebe den Schattenbeherrscher,

Und an der Schwelle noch, streng, rief er zurück sein Geschenk<sup>3)</sup>.

Nicht stillt Aphrodite dem schönen Knaben<sup>4)</sup> die Wunde,

Die in den zierlichen Leib grausam der Eber geritzt.

Nicht errettet den göttlichen Held<sup>5)</sup> die unsterbliche Mutter<sup>5)</sup>,

Wenn er, am skäischen Thor<sup>5)</sup> fallend sein Schicksal erfüllt.

Aber sie steigt aus dem Meer mit allen Töchtern des Nereus,

Und die Klage hebt an um den verherrlichten Sohn.

Siehe, da weinen die Götter, es weinen die Göttinnen alle,

Dass das Schöne vergeht, dass das Vollkommene stirbt.

Auch ein Klaglied zu sein im Mund der Geliebten ist herrlich,

Denn das Gemeine geht klanglos zum Orkus<sup>6)</sup> hinab.

**Anmerkungen.** <sup>1)</sup> d. i. Klagegesang. — <sup>2)</sup> d. i. Pluto, der Gott der vom Flusse Styx umfluteten Unterwelt. — <sup>3)</sup> Als der Sänger Orpheus seine Gattin Eurydike durch den Biss einer Schlange verloren hatte, stieg er in die Unterwelt hinab, und es gelang ihm durch seinen rührenden Gesang, den finsternen Pluto zur Rückgabe derselben zu bewegen. Da aber Orpheus gegen das ausdrückliche Verbot des Schattenbeherrschers nach Eurydike sich umschaute, bevor sie die Oberwelt betreten hatte, wurde sie ihm wieder entrisen. — <sup>4)</sup> Der schöne Jüngling Adonis, Sohn des Kypriers Kinyras, wurde auf der Jagd von einem Eber tödtlich verwundet. Aus seinem Blute erwuchs die Rose oder Anemone. Aphrodite, die Göttin der Liebe, die den schönen Jüngling lieb gewonnen hatte, betrauerte seinen Tod. — <sup>5)</sup> Der Heldenjüngling Achilles, Sohn des thessalischen Königs Peleus und der Meeresgöttin Thetis. Er fand bei der Belagerung von Troja, am skäischen Thor, seinen Tod durch einen Pfeil, den ihm der trojanische Königssohn Paris in die Ferse schoss. Achilles Mutter, Thetis, ist eine der fünfzig Nereiden, der anmuthigen Töchter des Meergerises Nereus. — <sup>6)</sup> d. i. die Unterwelt.

Figure 1.1.—(concluded)

including “Harzreise im Winter,” made them “almost unintelligible.”<sup>96</sup> Goethe himself eventually provided a commentary to elucidate the cryptic setting and discussed its inspiration in an autobiographical essay. Brahms’s selection from the middle of the ode begins with the word “but” (*aber*), making it even more difficult for listeners to gain their bearings. A reviewer of the piano score thought the opening phrase would “seem strange to anyone who is not familiar with the ‘Harzreise.’”<sup>97</sup>

One might expect that the English would have had a difficult time with a text by a German poet, but German audiences did as well. For a performance at the Lower Rhine Music Festival in Düsseldorf in 1874, the composer and critic Emil Krause (1840–1916), though highly complimentary of the piece, believed it demanded too much of the listener because the relatively brief work began so abruptly without any preparation. He recommended that for future performances the program include “some explanatory comments on the reason for Goethe’s poem, about the person and the situation in question.”<sup>98</sup> A critic for a Munich performance a couple of years later was pleased to report that the program included the poet’s account of the context and the poem’s “train of thought” (*Gedankengang*).<sup>99</sup> Hanslick also thought the text was challenging for audiences. Reviewing a performance of the *Rhapsody* in 1875, four years after its Vienna premiere, he remarked: “The gloomy seriousness of the composition and . . . Goethe’s poem, which is hardly understandable without commentary, . . . impede the acceptance of this work among the general public.”<sup>100</sup>

The *Schicksalslied* (Song of Destiny, 1868–71), a setting of a three-stanza poem from Friedrich Hölderlin’s Greek-infused novel *Hyperion*, presents a particularly informative example. The first two stanzas (in E-flat major) describe the blissful state of the spirits—“fateless” (*Schickssallos*) and “chastely preserved” (*keusch bewahrt*) surrounded by “eternal clarity” (*ewiger Klarheit*)—and the third (in C minor) contrasts the miserable existence on earth of “suffering humans” (*leidende Menschen*) with “no place to rest” (*keine Stätte zu ruhn*), blindly stumbling into “uncertainty” (*Ungewisse*). Brahms ends the work most unusually by reprising in C major the opening instrumental material first heard in E-flat, thus appearing to change the closing section from pessimistic despair to guarded hope. Brahms even wrote to Reinthaler, who had prepared the *Requiem*’s Bremen premiere: “I certainly say something that the poet does not say and, to be sure, it would be better if what’s missing were in fact his main concern.”<sup>101</sup>

Critics and scholars have long been puzzled by Brahms’s compositional tactic and most have decided he was deliberately unfaithful to the text.

Hanslick observed: "The poet concludes in this state of hopelessness, but not so the composer . . . a lengthy orchestral postlude dissolves the confused tribulation of human life into a blessed peace."<sup>102</sup> Recent scholars have especially taken Brahms to task for this seeming failure. Constantin Floros regards the *Schicksalslied* as "one of the relatively few instances in which the composer's conception diverges from that of the poet."<sup>103</sup> Likewise, James Webster explains that "on the surface, the work . . . appears to violate no fewer than three fundamental aesthetic principles," including "fidelity to the sense of the text."<sup>104</sup> Peter Petersen expresses it bluntly: "Brahms's setting . . . is a rare instance of a composer not merely placing an arbitrary interpretation on words but explicitly contradicting a poet's statement."<sup>105</sup>

Nicole Grimes has recently offered a plausible solution to this hermeneutical morass. Simply put, while other scholars have focused on the poem as an independent entity, she contends that Brahms's setting makes perfect musical sense when taking into account the poem's function in the novel. Grimes argues that "if we think of *Schicksalslied* as a setting of the poetic nucleus of Hölderlin's novel as articulated in this poem, charges of the violation of aesthetic principles and of arbitrary interpretations that contradict the poet's statement no longer stand. A nuanced and sophisticated reading of Hölderlin's poem in its narrative context opens a window onto a more compelling reading of Brahms's composition."<sup>106</sup> In other words, by consulting the intertext, Brahms's composition can be heard to be a completely faithful setting of the original source rather than a willful misreading.

The issue of context is so critical to my interpretation of the *Requiem* that it is worth citing two more scholars in regard to Brahms's music and nineteenth-century choral works in general. Christian Martin Schmidt in a survey of Brahms's secular cantatas, those just discussed here, argues that the "aesthetic validity and adequate reception" of those works depended on the educated middle class, who were capable of the "spontaneous understanding of the historical and literary context."<sup>107</sup> The highly esteemed German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, in his philosophically dense book on nineteenth-century music, went a step further by contending that the familiarity of an educated audience in the nineteenth century with well-known literary texts helped listeners insert missing information into the narrative of a work. Additionally, it allowed them to "compensate for dramaturgical shortcomings" by either ignoring them or failing even to notice them at all.<sup>108</sup> Or as John Butt has helpfully summarized his observations: "Dahlhaus suggests with his analysis of secular choral works by Brahms [*Rinaldo*], Berlioz [*Lélio*] and Bruch [*Odysseus*], composers continued to write music that not