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**Masterpiece 5 – A Time to Transcend**

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***O frondens virga* – Hildegard von Bingen**

It's hard to know where to begin an examination of the life and works of the redoubtable Hildegard von Bingen. Today, she is certainly one of the most well-known, venerated, and respected figures of the Middle Ages who were not kings, warriors, or any of those whose exploits and power shaped the course of history. Rather, she was a twelfth-century Benedictine nun whose life was devoted to religion, music, science, and literature. Her voluminous legacy of medical and scientific treatises, lyrical and dramatic poetry, religious writing of interpretation of visions, as well as a large body of musical compositions, has few equals from those times. Moreover, she exhibited an extraordinarily confident—perhaps aggressive—personality that enabled her to promulgate her writings and her musical compositions, and her leadership as abbess of convents. She didn't shrink from going over the heads of abbots and bishops, straight to Kings and Emperors in leading her nuns and building and securing her convents. All of this would have been impressive enough for those times—but for a woman it was unprecedented.

Born to a noble family in southwestern Germany, the Rhineland-Palatinate, the young Hildegard at a very young age distinguished herself for her religious visions. Their vividness, intensity, and her articulate interpretation of them led to her being bound over at the age of fourteen to a nearby Benedictine monastery. There, tutored by a friend and fellow novitiate, as well as sympathetic monks, her intellectual growth was rapid. She went on to author important scientific treatises, including imposing ones on medicine. Her prophecies and miracle working led to a widespread reputation, and moniker as “Sybil of the Rhine.”

Her life-long visionary experiences led to an impressive body of inspired poetry that interpreted theological ideas. Her symbolic, literary style was informed by her apocalyptic, prophetic personal visions. She set her texts to music, and a large corpus of her compositions has survived in manuscript collections, edited and published today. We must remember that she worked in the twelfth century, and what that means for our understanding of the fundamental nature of its music: the preponderance of music was sacred, even if non-liturgical; there was no such thing as “instrumental” music—although there was some ancillary use of instruments; all music was monophonic—meaning only one unaccompanied melodic line at a time; the ecclesiastical modes shaped the melodies; and finally, we have no firm knowledge at all of the rhythms of the melodies. Musical notation was in its infancy, and helped very little. So, with all of that, even with centuries of dedicated scholarly research, when music of those times is sung today, it is at best an informed approximation of what scholars hope it sounded like.

Hildegard left seventy-seven religious songs preserved in manuscript. Her musical settings are original, not borrowed from liturgical chant, and are primarily and variously antiphons, responses, sequences, and hymns—all of which may be used in sacred services. *O frondens virga* is an antiphon, a short chant that serves as a refrain to another chant with many verses, and can be used either in the Mass or in the Divine Office. Hildegard's poetry is rich with metaphors that interpret her visions of the transcendence of "Living Light," and her musical style has a soaring quality that much contemporary chant lacked.

Recorded history over the millennia is overwhelmingly the province of men and their deeds and exploits. So it is *mirabilis dictu* to finally encounter a woman—a true polymath—of the twelfth century who was so learned, so talented, and so powerful. It would be difficult, indeed, to name any predecessors. It is almost a miracle itself that almost a thousand years later, we know so much about her, and that her creative vision lives.

### ***Blue Cathedral* — Jennifer Higdon**

Higdon is one of America's leading composers of the last decade, enjoying wide recognition and commissions from a variety of distinguished symphony orchestras and virtuosi. She has a degree in flute performance and was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with an MA and a PhD. She went on to study composition at the Curtis Institute; her composition teachers include the distinguished composers George Crumb and Ned Rorem. A relatively late bloomer, she points to musical influences from Peter, Paul and Mary, the Beatles, and Simon and Garfunkel. With four Grammy nominations under her belt, she is also a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her *Violin Concerto*. It would be hard, indeed, to think of many contemporary American composers whose compositions are played more frequently than are hers. She's won just about every important award for music composition, and is a member of the faculty of the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Written in 1999, *Blue Cathedral* was commissioned for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Curtis Institute. Titles of musical compositions are often—most often, it can seem—misleading, but this one is singularly apt. Cast in a single short movement of lush, soothing cascades of orchestra sound, the over-used descriptor, "shimmering," is more than apropos in this case. Imaginative scoring for strings and delicate percussion—including exotic bells and water glasses—are the foundation for an evocation of the atmosphere of the title. Short motives from various wind instruments provide aphoristic commentaries throughout, but generally without what would be called "tunes." The whole weft of sound seems to gently and constantly float upward without having to start all over at the "bottom." It's a remarkable and sensual musical experience, and justly deserves its popularity as perhaps the composer's most performed composition.

Higdon's own words speak eloquently to her engagement with this thoughtful, spiritual work, and are a perfect complement to her musical voice:

"I began writing this piece at a unique juncture in my life and found myself pondering the question of what makes a life. The

recent loss of my younger brother, Andrew Blue, made me reflect on the amazing journeys that we all make in our lives, crossing paths with so many individuals singularly and collectively, learning and growing each step of the way. This piece represents the expression of the individual and the group...our inner travels and the places our souls carry us, the lessons we learn, and the growth we experience. In tribute to my brother, I feature solos for the clarinet (the instrument he played) and the flute (the instrument I play). Because I am the older sibling, it is the flute that appears first in this dialog. At the end of the work, the two instruments continue their dialogue, but it is the flute that drops out and the clarinet that continues on in the upward progressing journey.”

### ***A German Requiem, op. 45 — Johannes Brahms***

1. Blessed are they that mourn
2. For all flesh is as grass
3. Lord, teach me that I have an end
4. How lovely are thy dwelling places
5. You now have sorrow
6. For we have here no abiding city
7. Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord

The 1850s marked Brahms’ early professional career and the gradual recognition of his immense talents. His youthful compositions centered on solo piano works, chamber music and pieces for male choir. Significant in his early experience was meeting the Hungarian violinist, Ede Reményi, in 1850 and touring with him a bit later—Brahms’ encounter with the so-called gypsy musical style. That year also marked Brahms’ introduction to Robert Schumann, although the relationship with Robert and Clara took a few years to develop. In the interim, Brahms became friends with the great violin virtuoso, Joseph Joachim, and the two remained lifelong friends and musical collaborators. Significantly, he and Joachim spent time together in 1856, when Brahms was twenty-three, immersing themselves in an intense study of music from the past. They familiarized themselves with Renaissance and Baroque repertoire, and mastered the intricacies of counterpoint. Chorale preludes, characteristic dances, choral music, fugues, double counterpoint—it all was their bailiwick and became of supreme importance in Brahms’ lifelong musical style. And as we shall see, in the requiem.

But it was three years earlier, in 1853, that Brahms and the Schumanns cemented their relationship. Robert Schumann, one of the outstanding music journalists of his time, in his last published article, famously proclaimed of Brahms: “This is a chosen one.” This may have agreeably brought the young composer to greater public recognition, but it typically somewhat undermined his self-confidence. It was the beginning of an unusually close relationship between the famous couple and the young man. After Robert’s descent into mental illness, Brahms, as go between, became Clara’s only contact with Robert in his sanatorium, and more or less managed the household for them. The deep

friendship lasted until Robert's early death in 1856, and Clara's death years later in 1896. It would be difficult to posit a more heartfelt personal relationship for Brahms than that with the couple. Robert Schumann's championship of the young composer bolstered his career, and by the late 1850s and early 1860s significant, acclaimed compositions appeared. They include the early piano sonatas and piano quartets, the *Handel* variations, and the first piano concerto (1859).

The death of Brahms' cherished mother in February of 1865 is generally thought to be the proximate cause of the composer's turning his efforts to the composition of a large choral requiem—rather unusual for a youthful thirty-two year old composer. Although, apparently he had previously considered such a work. It is presumed that thoughts on the death of Robert Schumann played a part, as well. He worked on the requiem from 1866 until 1868, and it received its première in Bremen in the latter year. The original six movements were joined by a seventh one shortly after that première. Scored for large orchestra, chorus, and baritone and soprano soloists, it is Brahms' longest work, and precedes most of the other large works: the four symphonies, the concertos, and so forth.

Of course, religious works, including requiem masses have been one of the most important genres of classical music since its beginnings. Most major composers who have written choral music have produced requiems, and today we hear performances of them by composers from all historical periods. And they, understandably, have generally been Catholic Latin Masses, whether by Bach, Mozart, Berlioz, Bruckner, Verdi, and a host of others. They are based on the various texts of the Roman Rite, and as such, are part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Important liturgical themes in these requiems have to do with grief, the fearsome Day of Judgment, eternal rest, various prayers for departed souls, redemption through Jesus Christ, and the resurrection. Twentieth-century composers of requiems and other works of similar intent have generally gone in a different direction, abandoning the Catholic liturgical elements for various approaches to more broad spiritual or philosophical considerations. One has only to think of compositions by Benjamin Britten, Paul Hindemith, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Frederick Delius, for example.

With this in mind, Brahms' requiem may be said to have led the way away from the traditional Catholic liturgy and its emphases, and toward more personal spiritual reflections in a variety of humanistic approaches. The full title of Brahms' composition tells us just that: *A German Requiem, to Words of the Holy Scriptures*. It's "German," not because it is for Germans—although it was that—but because the text is not in Catholic Latin, but taken rather from Luther's Protestant Bible (in German, of course). Moreover, Brahms' personal choices of texts from the Bible consistently emphasize themes significantly different from those of the Roman Liturgy. Comfort for the living and hope for the Resurrection are his focus, not redemption through Jesus and the terrors of the Day of Judgment.

This mood is set immediately in the first movement, "Blessed are they that mourn," with its lush sonorities (no violins!), rich, undulating harmonies, and easy pace. Of technical interest are the first three notes of the soprano choral part: a third and a step up. This figure pervades the entire work; Brahms manipulates it in every possible configuration—up, down, upside down and backwards, you name it. It is a cogent example of Brahms' awareness and

respect for historical procedures and his lifelong, famed reputation for craftsmanship and economy of means. Notice how “those that go out with tears” is set to drooping chromaticism and their return in joy is set to sudden leaping movement. Brahms misses nothing.

Darkness ensues in the next movement, “For all flesh is as grass,” wherein the dark reality of our brief existence is borne by a plodding march in three-four time. Contemporary critics foolishly criticized the use of a “grotesque waltz” for this text. But, of course, the composer was on the mark. The sense of inevitable doom here no doubt was the basis for the movement’s use in a TV series about the Nazi conflagration. The relentless timpani drives the funeral march. The shades are suddenly banished at the words, “So be patient now my dear brothers, until the coming of the Lord.” with a new, major key, and a brighter tempo. But soon, the plodding march returns. Brahms couldn’t leave it here, so the movement ends triumphantly with a joyous affirmation of “But the word of the Lord endures forever.” So sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The thrust of the Requiem takes a turn in the third movement and focuses on the personalized angst of a single voice—speaking for all of us existentially as individuals in an infinite and unforgiving universe. The preponderance of the movement is a solo for baritone, singing words from Psalm 39. The soloist is ridden with anxiety and doubt, fighting to accept the stultifying reality of the brevity of life. His lengthy contemplation of his existential dilemma is accompanied by the chorus, repeating and reiterating his fears with dramatic interjections. He ends with the question: “Now, Lord, how can I console myself?” The chorus responds with reassuring words from the *Wisdom of Solomon* in the Apocrypha: “The righteous souls are in God’s hand.” And in the best tradition of choral works, the joy and happiness of this revelation is set in a brisk contrapuntal ending, the voices weaving in and out in a weft of exultation. A long pedal in the low instrumental basses sustains throughout to the end—perhaps implying the eternal promise of the words.

The mellifluous fourth movement is perhaps the most well known and beloved of the requiem. A gentle paean to the beauty and serenity of heaven, it is a musical harbinger of so many like stylistic passages familiar in works to come. Whether Brahms’ rich romantic harmonies, his penchant for elegant, swaying triple meters, or the shimmering scoring for woodwinds, it all seems to remind us vaguely of perhaps some of the elegant *Liebeslieder* waltzes or parts of his second symphony.

The soprano solo of the fifth movement balances the baritone of the third, and is the additional movement that he composed two years after the first six. It nicely establishes the balanced arch form of the seven movements, creating affinities between movements I & VII, II & VI, and III & V. The mood of the solo soprano here could not contrast more with the doubt and anxiety of the baritone of the third movement. The whole thrust is contained in the phrase: “I will comfort you as a mother comforts.” The gently undulating lines of the strings and woodwinds seem to create the reassuring atmosphere of a cradlesong, while the choir unobtrusively echoes the text. It concludes with the simultaneous setting of “I will see you again,” from the Book of John and “as a mother comforts,” from Isaiah.

The sixth movement is the resurrection, not one of terror and condemnation, but rather couched in terms of a revealed “mystery.” The chorus leads, but is soon dramatically interrupted by the baritone soloist, who—

speaking as a sole voice of authority—proclaims the “mystery.” Thereafter, the chorus responds to each revelation. The drama of the cataclysm is all there, of course, and after a magnificent narrative of the unfolding events, we arrive at a stupendous C major chord of triumph. After that, there’s nothing left but to do but celebrate in the true and traditional Beethovenian fashion with an energetic, cascading choral fugue of victory.

Finally, the composer concludes this remarkable and unique “requiem” as he began it, in an atmosphere of spiritual sustenance and reassurance. As has often been the case throughout, the full woodwind choir is employed for a light, appropriately atmospheric mood, over the strings and low horns. The trumpets, understandably take a break, but the trombones fulfill their traditional ecclesiastic rôle and accompany the reference to the “spirit” speaking. The harps appropriately finally return and lead to the final sonorous wind chord. It is not without significance that the last word sung by the chorus is the same as that which began this uniquely comforting work: “Blessed....”

--Wm. E. Runyan  
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