

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

Micah Hunter's response in the June 2007 *Choral Journal* to Michael Moore's April 2007 *CJ* article "Brahms's *A German Requiem* and the Matter of Aesthetic Meaning" cites Arthur M. Abell's 1955 book *Talks with Great Composers* as evidence of Brahms having written his *Requiem* from an overtly Christian point of view. Having written about this issue as well in the context of a March 2007 *CJ* article "Hope in the Unifying Language of Music – Teaching Sacred Music in a Secular Context," I believe this assertion and its highly questionable source must not go unchallenged.

As discussed by Malcolm McDonald in his 2002 *Oxford Master Musician Series* biography of Brahms (in an extended footnote on page 396), there are compelling reasons why Arthur Abell's book of recollections of "intimate conversations" with Brahms, Puccini, Strauss, and others should be considered highly suspect. McDonald writes that while Abell, a German-American violinist, probably did have some personal contact with Brahms, the verbatim stenographer's transcript upon which the book is supposedly based has yet to be produced. And much of the evangelical, spiritualist language attributed to Brahms in the conversation is unlike anything found in the composer's many extant letters, which tend to be devoid of explicitly religious references.

McDonald suggests that the language of Abell's *Talks* is probably closer to the beliefs of Abell, who published the alleged conversation over fifty years after the fact, supposedly at Brahms insistence. The conversations with the other composers in the book are similar in their composers' religious perspectives, though not even a stenographer's record is claimed for these. In sum, in more than fifty years since its publication, corroborating evidence has yet to appear in support of the veracity of Arthur Abell's conversations with famous composers.

Certainly the texts Brahms chose for his *Requiem* do include several passages from the New Testament, and Mr. Hunter or anyone else is free to interpret these

and other texts in the *Requiem* according to their own beliefs. However, we have solid, concrete evidence from Brahms's own written correspondence with Carl Martin Reinthaler, the organist at Bremen Cathedral who prepared the chorus and orchestra for the first performance of the *Requiem*, that Brahms explicitly resisted pressure to include the name of Christ and more overtly Christian references in the texts he chose. Among other factors that may have motivated this impulse toward universality, Brahms lived in an overtly anti-Semitic Viennese culture, where some of his closest associates were Jewish. His apparent desire to write a human requiem that could speak more inclusively to those outside of Christian orthodoxy should be acknowledged and respected.

As I tried to suggest in an earlier essay on this topic, cited above, Brahms can be an example to us of how some of the most profoundly spiritual music was written by composers who did not identify with or participate in the explicit religiosity of their time. This is not at all to claim that religious motivation was not a factor in their work, or that they were not responding to the theological implications of the sacred texts they set to music. But it is to say that a complete understanding of these works cannot be confined within the narrow parameters of a particular religious orthodoxy. The music of religiously independent composers such as Brahms should be cause for celebration and gratitude by people from a diverse range of religious and non-religious perspectives. We can find in this music not only the challenge and inspiration our personal beliefs need to develop and grow, but the possibility for a broader unity that continues to elude us at great cost.

Thomas Lloyd
Haverford, Pennsylvania

Dear Editor,

Thank you Jo Ann Miller for your insights about attendance policies as stated in the Repertoire and Standards section under Community Choirs. We too often forget that our singers have other lives, and plac-

ing hoops for them to do us the favor of singing with us certainly does not aid our cause. I have been involved with community choruses for over half a century, and have observed the ascendancy and demise of numbers of choruses. I can tell you this, unless you are the only game in town, if you place too many obstacles in front of singers who wish to be in your chorus, you have found the formula for demise.

Adrian G. Horn
Victor, New York

Dear Editor,

As I read the article by Duane Cottrell (Voice Science in the Vocal Rehearsal, May 2007), I was reminded that one of the best resources for choral directors is no longer in print. *Artistic Choral Singing* by Harry Robert Wilson was the "bible" for those who pursued graduated degrees at Teachers College, Columbia University fifty years ago. Wilson, whom I believe was a founder of ACDA, pioneered group choral techniques that met all the concerns about resonance expressed by Cottrell. One quote proves the point:

Any attempt to develop resonance by direct control invariably brings restriction and tension of the throat muscles, with the resultant faulty production. Do not direct the voice on the teeth, in the nose, or in the 'masque'. It is the vibrating [column of air] which gives resonance to the voice, not the sense of vibration in the teeth, muscle tissue, or bone tissue.

Richard A. Disharoon
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