Brahms's Late Spirituality: Hope in the Vier Ernste Gesänge, Op. 121

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BRAHMS’S LATE SPIRITUALITY:
HOPE IN THE VIER ERNSTE GESÄNGE, OP. 121

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For Christ and His Kingdom
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This thesis presents a new interpretation of Johannes Brahms’s *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121. Foundational information is provided on Brahms’s spirituality and knowledge of the Bible, his personal life surrounding the composition of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, and his relationship to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which has previously been connected to these songs. The unity of the cycle is also considered; although it has been widely claimed that the final song either does not belong in the set or is the weakest of the four, this interpretation argues for its validity and its importance in an overall understanding of the set. Key musical details are explored in each of the four songs and a conclusion is drawn: Brahms’s choice of texts and musical settings of those texts point to a sense of hope which may be an indication of Brahms’s own late spirituality.
CHAPTER 1

SPIRITUALITY, PHILOSOPHY, AND DEATH: 
THE JOURNEY TO THE VIERERNSTE GESÄNGE

In the century since its composition in 1896, Johannes Brahms’s song cycle *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121 has become a major work within his *oeuvre*, the world of Lieder, and the larger Western musical canon. It stands out as his only genuine song cycle, his first foray into song after a ten-year hiatus, his only setting of Biblical text for solo voice and piano, and arguably his finest accomplishment in the genre. Written only a year before Brahms’s death, the *Four Serious Songs* reflect the spiritual and philosophical musings of an aging composer confronted by death. In the early 1890s the deaths of close friends such as Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, Theodor Billroth, Hans von Bülow, and Philipp Spitta undoubtedly weighed heavily on Brahms. He began composing the *Vier ernste Gesänge* around the time of Clara Schumann’s stroke, continued work on them during her illness, and gave their premiere performance to a gathering of friends after her funeral. Both the touching context in which the songs were composed and Brahms’s extraordinary choice of text have been frequently discussed among historians and music lovers.

**Brahms, the Bible, and Spirituality**

Brahms grew up as a North German Protestant with knowledge of the Bible. A popular quotation from Richard Heuberger recounts Brahms’s childhood interaction with the Bible:

Brahms praised the manner in which young Protestants learn, or learned. He said, “We learned the Bible by heart, without understanding any of it. Should a light ignite in one later, then one already has all of the material which then suddenly comes to life. As a lad I was always fanciful and a
From an early age Brahms knew the Bible, but his study was academic and cultural rather than religious or spiritual. For Daniel Beller-McKenna, the “light” that ignited Brahms’s understanding of the Bible was Brahms’s relationship with Robert Schumann. Beller-McKenna cites two ways in which Robert Schumann encouraged Brahms’s interest in the Bible. The first is through his famous 1853 article “Neue Bahnen,” which featured Schumann’s praise and expectation of Brahms, placing him in the German musical pantheon alongside Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The pressure from this declaration was great, and Beller-McKenna asserts that Brahms saw the Bible as a way to connect to the great Austro-Germanic tradition (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 2); through close knowledge of Luther’s Bible, he was able to maintain a strong connection to his cultural heritage and ensure a greater opportunity to act as a standard bearer for the German musical tradition. Secondly, Brahms was influenced by Schumann’s own interest in the Bible. An anecdote from Rudolf von der Leyen helps to explain:

On one occasion we spoke about Robert Schumann, Brahms’s great and most beloved friend, and specifically about the sad time of his sickness in Endenich. Brahms told me that Schumann longed for the Bible there, and that his desire was understood by his doctors to be a new symptom of his mental illness and was, for the most part, denied. “People just don’t understand,” said Brahms, “that we North Germans crave the Bible and do not let a day go by without it. In my study I can pick out [herausgreifen] my Bible even in the dark!” (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 7)

Beller-McKenna finds evidence of Schumann’s influence in the frequency and quality of Brahms’s Biblical settings. One of his best-known and magnificent Biblical settings is his requiem. Brahms’s scholars agree on the central role that Schumann’s death played in Brahms’s composition of the great Ein deutsches Requiem, op. 45 (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 1). Beller-McKenna argues that before op. 45 “Brahms was typical of earlier nineteenth-century Romantic composers, in that the few biblical texts he did set were familiar passages that had already been set by earlier composers” (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 2). With the Requiem, however, Brahms’s use of Biblical texts became wider and more varied. He used sixteen separate passages in the Requiem alone, and continued to
set Biblical texts with increasing frequency. He often reached beyond the expected passages (especially the Psalms) to texts that seem to reflect his own reading. It is possible then, to see Robert Schumann’s role in Brahms’s contemplation of and musical setting of the Bible.

Although many stories confirm that Brahms’s Christian faith was generally unorthodox and undogmatic, he did demonstrate – and take pride in – a strong knowledge of scripture and theology, even writing in a letter to Otto Dessoff, “I enclose a trifle\(^1\), for which, perhaps – my Bible knowledge is to be praised” (Beller-McKenna 2004, 37-38). In his later years, and especially during the early 1890s, it seems that Brahms returned to spirituality, if not formal religion, for answers. Beller-McKenna acknowledges that “spirituality, it seems, was less ambiguous for Brahms in his sixties than it had been through most of his adult life…Brahms displayed a strong impulse to deal in strictly Christian and overwhelmingly Lutheran texts in his last years” (Beller-McKenna 2004, 171). One of Brahms’s greatest late works, also based on a Biblical text, the *Vier ernste Gesänge* are a genuine reflection of Brahms’s spiritual thoughts in his last years.

**The *Vier ernste Gesänge***

By the time he composed the *Vier ernste Gesänge* in 1896, Brahms had lived a full life, experienced much suffering and the death of many close friends, and was beginning to feel the reality of his own mortality due to serious illness. Eight years prior, he had copied several passages into a notebook designated for Biblical texts he intended to set to music, including 1 Kings 6:11-12, Ecclesiasticus 41:1-4, Ecclesiastes 3:18-22 and 4:1-4, I Corinthians 13, and the Song of Solomon 9:1-12. In his book *Brahms and the German Spirit* Daniel Beller-McKenna observes that these six texts were copied into Brahms’s notebook as a group, as they appear in Folios 15v through 19r and, unlike the texts before them – shorter texts written in pencil – they tend to be longer texts and are written in ink (Beller-McKenna 2004, 54-55). He asserts that the two “Solomon as King” texts (the first and last in this section of the notebook) were likely copied into the notebook in the year 1888, the “Drei-Kaiser-Jahr,” when both Emperor Wilhelm I and his heir, Frederick III died in quick succession (Beller-McKenna 2004, 63). These events

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\(^1\) The piece to which Brahms refers is the “Warum” motet of 1877.
reportedly had a significant impact on Brahms; Max Kalbeck remembers that he “felt the blow, which befell the royal family and house, the fatherland, and the people, more painfully than many who were closer to the monarch” (Kalbeck 1914, 111). This marked the beginning of a series of deaths that would have a significant impact upon Brahms. His close friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg\textsuperscript{2}, with whom he had corresponded frequently concerning the setting of Biblical texts, died in 1892. He was greatly affected by her death, writing to her husband, Heinrich, “Be assured I am full of sorrow and profoundest sympathy as I think of you…You know how unutterably I myself suffer by the loss of your beloved wife…It would do me so much good just to sit beside you quietly, press your hand, and share your thoughts of the dear marvelous woman” (Kalbeck 1987, 403). In February 1894 both Hans von Bülow and Theodor Billroth died. Hans von Bülow was a conductor and ardent supporter of Brahms’s music who esteemed him as a great composer in the line of Bach and Beethoven, famously declaring, “The three greatest composers are Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. All the others are cretins” (Walker 2010, 289). He also performed Brahms’s pieces frequently, thus ensuring Brahms’s place in the German musical pantheon. Billroth, a surgeon and amateur musician, had not only stood alongside Brahms in his fight against the innovations of Wagner and Liszt but had also provided valuable musical insight on many of his compositions.\textsuperscript{3} Only three months later Brahms’s close friend, musicologist and critic Philipp Spitta, died. When Clara Schumann became ill, suffering a stroke in March of 1896, Brahms had surely had his fill of illness and death. By 1896 Brahms was himself sick. In a letter to Heinrich von Herzogenberg on 15 September, Brahms wrote that he had not “succeeded in losing my touch of jaundice so far” (Kalbeck 1987, 418). It is likely that Brahms recognized jaundice as a symptom of liver cancer, which had taken his father’s life 25 years earlier.

\textsuperscript{2} Although it is unknown exactly when Brahms met the Herzogenbergs (Heinrich and his wife, Elisabeth), it appears to be some time in the late 1860s, when Heinrich studied composition with Brahms’s friend Felix Otto Dessoff. Elisabeth was a pianist and composer in her own right and it is clear from letters exchanged between the two of them – from 1876 to her death in 1892 – that Brahms very much respected and valued her opinion on musical issues. He often sent her manuscripts of his new works and received both ebullient praise and harsh criticism in return.

\textsuperscript{3} These insights can be further explored in the Brahms-Billroth correspondence – \textit{Johannes Brahms and Theodor Billroth: letters from a musical friendship}, translated and edited by Hans Barkan (University of Oklahoma Press, 1957).
Brahms decided to compose the *Vier ernste Gesänge*. Arnold Schoenberg best expressed the benefit of this awareness of mortality in his article “Brahms the Progressive,” saying:

> If a man who knows that he will die soon makes his account with earth and with heaven, prepares his soul for the departure, and balances what he leaves with what he will receive, he might desire to incorporate a word – a part of the wisdom he has acquired – into the knowledge of mankind, if he is one of the Great. One might doubt about the sense of life if it then would be a mere accident that such a work, a life-terminating work, would not represent more than just another opus. Or is one entitled to assume that a message from a man who is already half on the other side progresses to the uttermost limit of the still-expressible? (Schoenberg 1975, 438)

**The Question of Unity**

The question of unity in the *Vier ernste Gesänge* is widely discussed in scholarly literature because of its importance in developing an understanding not only of the songs themselves but also of Brahms’s late spirituality. Critics seem to be unanimous regarding the value of the first three songs and more specifically the third song, “O Tod, wie bitter bist du,” placing the climax of the entire cycle at Song 3, measures 17 and 18, with the ascending transformation of the so-called “death motive.” This change from minor to major, from descending to ascending melodic contour, and from the text “O Tod, wie bitter bist du” to “O Tod, wie wohl tust du,” is often seen as an acceptance of death, or at least as resignation to it. But the set is not finished here. After the third song, Brahms performs an about-face, setting a text from I Corinthians, an ode to love, seemingly far removed from the sentiment expressed in the texts from Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus used in the first three songs. Malcolm Boyd and others name the first three serious songs as the definitive settings of their texts. Just as frequently they decry the inclusion of the fourth song in the cycle, saying that “there is nothing at all in this text to relate it to the others” and “it really has no place in this cycle” (Boyd 1967, 594-95). Possible explanations for its inclusion range from Brahms’s reluctance to expose his true feelings (Boyd 1967, 594), to an expression of Brahms’s feelings of failure (Johnson 2006, 385), to the notion that the fourth song was composed much earlier than the others and uses a text read at the funeral of Brahms’s close friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg (Kalbeck 1904, 451-54), to Brahms’s encounter with and rejection of Schopenhauerian pessimism.
(Beller-McKenna 1994a, 185). This study sees the inclusion of the fourth song as a purposeful act by Brahms. I argue that the fourth song acts as a continuation of a set of spiritual ideas that flows logically from each song to the next. In this way Brahms documents his own spiritual journey, expressing the universal frustrations and questions of all human beings and offering a hopeful answer.

**Schopenhauer**

In his discussion of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Beller-McKenna stresses the influence of Schopenhauer’s philosophy on Brahms’s thinking, both in general and in relation to op. 121. The philosophy of Schopenhauer centers on one key idea, an idea that is clearly articulated in the title of his most famous work: *The World as Will and Representation*. For Schopenhauer, the world could be thought of in two ways: as representation – as it appears to a thinking person – and as Will – a Kantian thing-in-itself. Furthermore, he asserts that each objectification of the Will is constantly fighting against all others, and therefore, the Will can never be satisfied, creating a never-ending cycle of suffering and desire. He writes in *The World as Will and Representation*:

> The ceaseless efforts to banish suffering achieve nothing more than a change in its form...If, which is very difficult, we have succeeded in removing pain in this form, it at once appears on the scene in a thousand others, varying according to age and circumstances, such as sexual impulse, passionate love, jealousy, envy, hatred, anxiety, ambition, avarice, sickness, and so on. Finally, if it cannot find entry in any other shape, it comes in the sad, grey garment of weariness, satiety, and boredom, against which many different attempts are made. Even if we ultimately succeed in driving these away, it will hardly be done without letting pain in once again in one of the previous forms, and thus starting the dance once more at the beginning; for every human life is tossed backwards and forwards between pain and boredom. (Schopenhauer 1966, 1:315)

It is this idea that has caused many to view Schopenhauer’s philosophy as pessimistic. Dale Jacquette’s description of Schopenhauer’s pessimism is representative of the broader view. He says:

> …the world in reality, thing-in-itself, reveals its character in the world as conflict, and is eternal and unchanging in its self-opposition. The world as Will endlessly consumes itself in the only way it can, according to Schopenhauer, objectifying itself in the world as representation where very entity always tries to consume every other.
Schopenhauer describes a pathetic cycle of desire, want and lack, satiety, surfeit and boredom as the inevitable pattern of human suffering even for the most fortunate willing subjects caught up in the life of desire. In all of philosophical literature there is no more uncompromisingly negative perspective than Schopenhauer offers on the prospects of existence. (Jacquette 2005, 115)

Despite Jacquette and others’ strong assertions, it is not necessary to see Schopenhauer’s philosophy as pessimistic. In fact, Schopenhauer himself did not use the term pessimism – “Pessimismus” – to describe his own philosophy (only that of much earlier theologians and philosophers). The blanket term “pessimistic” does not capture the refinement and complexity of Schopenhauer’s ideas and, in spite of common practice, does not serve well as a synonym for “Schopenhauerian.”

It is unknown exactly when Brahms became familiar with Schopenhauer’s writing, but by the time he met Carl Tausig in 1862, he had enough knowledge to defend against the pianist’s attempts to convince him of the philosophy of WWR. In fact, Brahms’s copy of The World as Will and Representation, littered with marginal notes, was found in his library at the time of his death (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 190-91). It is less clear, however, just what Brahms thought about Schopenhauer’s philosophy, although many signs show that he respected Schopenhauer and his writings. In addition to a letter from Schopenhauer, which he kept in a collection of letters and scores he received from people he revered, the philosopher’s impact on Brahms can be seen in a reminiscence from composer and friend Joseph Suk (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 191). Recalling a discussion concerning faith and religion which he had with Brahms and Dvořák in March 1896, Suk remembers Brahms saying, “I have read too much Schopenhauer, and things appear much differently to me” (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 191).

Beyond passing references to the philosopher, however, are more specific signs that Brahms disagreed with Schopenhauer’s ideas. In his biography on Brahms, Max Kalbeck claims that Carl Tausig spent time trying to convince Brahms of the philosophy found in

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4 Carl Tausig was a member of Wagner’s circle, a composer who has long been associated with the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Beller-McKenna notes that Brahms’s modernist belief in progress and refusal to fully give in to melancholy allowed him to stand outside of the Völkisch culture of Wagner’s followers (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 190). He cites Leon Botstein’s article, “Brahms and Nineteenth-Century Painting” in 19th Century Music 14 (1990): 157-59.
The World as Will and Representation, but that Brahms had “had enough with the ‘Parerga [und Paralipomena]’” (Kalbeck 1908, 37-38). Moreover, Beller-McKenna observes that Brahms was impatient with those who readily accepted the popular philosophy. He cites Eduard Hanslick as saying, “Brahms was disgusted with every new music critic who immediately cited Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as soon as they mentioned a new opera or symphony” (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 192). Finally, taking into consideration Brahms’s spiritual and religious background, it is difficult to imagine that he would wholeheartedly accept the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which was so devoid of spirituality. We must conclude, in the end, that Brahms maintained an interest in Schopenhauer’s ideas, no matter what his response to them was, and that his worldview and thus his music, was influenced to some degree by them.

Schopenhauer’s influence on Brahms is particularly interesting when considering the Vier ernste Gesänge. Many of Schopenhauer’s ideas are strongly reminiscent of the Biblical texts chosen for the first three songs of the set. One striking passage from The World as Will and Representation demonstrates very clearly the influence of Ecclesiastes on Schopenhauer’s philosophy:

If life itself were a precious blessing, and decidedly preferable to non-existence, the exit from it would not need to be guarded by such fearful watchmen as death and its terrors. But who would go on living life as it is, if death were less terrible? And who could bear even the mere thought of death, if life were a pleasure? But the former still always has the good point of being the end of life, and we console ourselves with death in regard to the sufferings of life and with the sufferings of life in regard to death. (Schopenhauer 1966, 2:578)

Even when quoting from others, Schopenhauer demonstrates an understanding of and affinity for the ideas of Ecclesiastes. Beller-McKenna calls attention to two quotations in particular, from Plutarch and Plato, found at the end of the second book of The World As Will and Representation. From Plutarch, Schopenhauer quotes, “Pity him who is born, because he faces so many evils; but the dead are to be accompanied with mirth and blessings because they have escaped from so many sufferings” (Schopenhauer 1966, 2:586). In a similar quotation from the Apology of Socrates, Plato writes, “Not to be born

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5 Parerga und Paralipomena is a collection of essays by Arthur Schopenhauer published in 1851.
would be the best thing for man, never to behold the sun’s scorching rays; but if one is born, then one is to press as quickly as possible to the portals of Hades, and rest there under the earth” (Schopenhauer 1966, 2:586). These two quotations sound remarkably similar to the sentiments expressed by Qoholeth in Ecclesiastes and demonstrate the commonality of this idea, spanning a period of more than five hundred years from Plato, to Qoholeth, to Plutarch. In Ecclesiastes 4:2-3, the text chosen by Brahms for song 2, “Ich wandte mich und sahe,” Qoholeth despairs, saying, “So I praised the dead who had already died, more than the living who still had life; but he who not yet is, is better than both, and does not perceive the evil that happens under the sun” (Fischer-Dieskau 1984, 387). Nevertheless, Brahms’s decision to set Biblical texts (including some text which is less in line with Schopenhauer’s philosophy), coupled with his spiritual and religious background, seems to indicate an interest in the Bible itself, rather than Schopenhauer’s ideas. Furthermore, his settings of these texts suggest his acknowledgment of the existence of a higher power quite in line with the Christian God, something that does not fit into Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the Will.

Beller-McKenna offers a reading of the set that sees Brahms’s use of these texts, which convey such a similar message to Schopenhauer, as a commentary on Schopenhauerian pessimism. For Beller-McKenna, the differences between songs 1, 2 and 3 and song 4 can be explained by Brahms’s juxtaposition of Schopenhauerian pessimism – found in songs 1 through 3 – with the love-centered philosophy of such German Romantics as Hegel and Hölderlin. On the other hand, one needn’t even look to Hegel and Hölderlin to understand Brahms’s song; as will be further explored in Chapter 5, Brahms seems to draw directly from Paul’s I Corinthians message. Furthermore, Brahms’s setting of the I Corinthians text suggests an understanding of Paul’s Christian message of hope. Careful analyses of songs 1 through 3 also show that Brahms’s settings of apparently pessimistic texts from Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus are not completely devoid of hope. Whether he always agreed with the philosopher, the works of Schopenhauer informed Brahms’s worldview. Schopenhauer’s thinking may be more evident in another way.

The importance of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in Brahms’s thought can be considered not only in terms of his apparent pessimism, but also with regard to his ideas
concerning the arts and the work of the aesthetic genius. Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the arts included a hierarchy – based on a gradation of the Will’s objectification – in which architecture and sculpture represented the lowest art forms and music was the highest. For Schopenhauer, music was the only art form that, alongside nature, was a “direct expression of the Will” (Jacquette 2005, 154). In Schopenhauer’s words,

…music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind themselves, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them. Nevertheless, we understand them perfectly in this extracted quintessence. (Schopenhauer 1966, 1:261)

Although this philosophy of music relates more readily to instrumental or absolute music than to texted or programmatic music, it can also be thought of another way. Music can be seen as expressing a verbal text more closely in terms of the Will; the music embodies the experience of Will that the text responds to as a Representation. The Vier ernste Gesänge are at once texted and musically expressive. One example of the use of music to enhance text is the significant role that the piano accompaniment plays. The piano often acts as a melodic instrument and can even be more important than the voice (for example, in the last section of song 4, where the piano’s melody is more prominent than the vocal melody sung a thirteenth below it). In many instances, themes are introduced in the piano only to be given texted meaning in the voice later (as in the word “Tränen” in song 2). Furthermore, the four songs use musical devices to create many distinct moods, atmospheres that enhance the meaning of the text. They suggest that Brahms found truth in Schopenhauer’s ideas about the nature of music and set about using its unique emotive qualities to express a personal journey.

Concerning the content of art, according to Dale Jacquettte, Schopenhauer valued “human beauty, the beauty of the Idea of humanity, and the human form, as the highest type of beauty in any art form” (Jacquette 2005, 153). In the Vier ernste Gesänge, we see

6 Carl Dahlhaus comments on Schopenhauer’s view on text, saying “Schopenhauer considers the borders separating the associations that impose themselves on a hearing of instrumental music, the models of program music, and the texts of program music, to be indistinct, as all of them – relative to the essence of music – can be categorized negatively as incidental” (Dahlhaus 1991, 131).
a strong theme describing the human condition: the inevitability of death, the suffering of life, and the importance of love. The texts from Ecclesiastes consider real existential issues while the text from I Corinthians suggests a spiritual answer to human questions. Through his choice and combination of texts, Brahms provides his own commentary on the idea of humanity, sharing what he has learned over the course of a sixty-three-year life.

Finally, it is possible that Schopenhauer’s philosophy played a role in Brahms decision to write the *Vier ernste Gesänge*. According to Schopenhauer, the artistic genius is “not merely a craftworker making decorative objects to amuse or entertain, but…a kind of existential hero, as well as victim, engaged in terrible struggles of passion and will…He sees great art as the outcome of a deep conflict and frustration of the will in what are often emotionally painful efforts of self-expression…” (Jacquette 2005, 146). A genius inevitably sees his art as a personal expression and, likewise, it is natural for a genius to express his inner struggle through art. While avoiding the pitfalls of the biographical fallacy, it is also important to acknowledge this idea as a popular one in nineteenth-century art. In fact, Dale Jacquette notes that “Schopenhauer’s aesthetics exerted an enormous influence on a large and diverse number of thinkers and artists in philosophy and the arts, who grasped in his thought the principles for a personal philosophy of life along with its message for the arts” (Jacquette 2005, 146). In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer asserts that art “repeats the eternal Ideas apprehended through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding element in all the phenomena of the world. According to the material in which it repeats, it is sculpture, painting, poetry or music. Its only source is knowledge of the Ideas; its sole aim is communication of this knowledge” (Schopenhauer 1966, 1:184-5). Thus, considering Brahms’s awareness of Schopenhauer, it can be suggested that from the philosophy and writings of Schopenhauer, particularly concerning the arts, and from the influence of his mentor Schumann, Brahms gained the courage and permission to express his personal spirituality through the medium of music. The *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121, show Brahms’s deepening faith and hope in his final years.

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7 Those influenced by Schopenhauer’s philosophy include Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Leo Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Richard Wagner, among many others.
In preparation for this discussion, each of the four songs has been carefully examined for aspects of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, and text setting. With a foundation of systematic musical investigation and historical research, I present a new reading of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*. In the following chapters, the most relevant features of each song will be described, with particular attention paid to text choice and text setting. The meanings of the texts will be considered together with Brahms’s interpretation of and commentary on them. After each song is examined for expressive musical detail, broad themes and overarching ideas will be considered. Throughout this document, I would like to suggest an interpretation of Brahms’s *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121 that argues for the unity of the cycle, the representation of hope found throughout the four songs, and their function as Brahms’s personal expression of his own spirituality.
CHAPTER 2

“DENN ES GEHET DEM MENSCHEN”

“Denn es gehet dem Menschen”

Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem
Vieh,
wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch;
und haben alle einerlei Odem;
und der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn
das Vieh:
denn es ist alles eitel.
Es fährt alles an einen Ort;
es ist alles von Staub gemacht
und wird wieder zu Staub.
Wer weiß, ob der Geist des Menschen
aufwärts fahre,
und der Odem des Viehes
unterwärts unter die Erde fahre?
Darum sahe ich, daß nichts Bessers ist,
denn daß der Mensch fröhlich sei in
seiner Arbeit;
denn das ist sein Teil.
Denn wer will ihn dahin bringen,
daß er sehe, was nach ihm geschehen
wird?

“For Man Fares”

For man fares as does the
beast,
as the latter dies, so he dies too;
and all have the same breath;
and man has not more than
the beast:
for all is in vain.
All go to one place;
all are made of dust
and will to dust return.
Who knows if the spirit of man go
upward,
and the breath of the beast
go downward under the earth?
So I saw that there is nothing better
than that a man be joyful in
his work,
for that is his lot.
For who can bring him
to see what will be after
him?

(Fischer-Dieskau 1984, 387)

A discussion of text choice in the Vier ernste Gesänge leads to a quotation from a
letter Brahms wrote to Elisabeth von Herzogenberg in July 1880. He says, “I am quite
willing to write motets, or anything for chorus (I am heartily sick of everything else!); but
won’t you try and find me some words? One can’t have them made to order unless one
begins before good reading has spoilt one. They are not heathenish enough for me in the
Bible” (Kalbeck 1987, 106). Indeed, the Four Serious Songs contain no overt references
to God, Christ, or any particularly Christian theological ideas. However, this statement
does not necessarily point to a lack of faith. Rather it is an indication of Brahms’s
understanding of the genre in which he would be writing, his intention for its
performance, and his knowledge of its probable audience. When he composed the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, there was little precedent for setting Biblical texts in Lieder. German
poets such as Heine, Eichendorff, and Goethe – who drew their inspiration from secular
and folk tradition – reigned supreme in the world of lied.

For most readers, the Bible was seen as a sacred text and not as high literature. Thus, biblical texts were reserved for sacred works, mostly oratorios and choral pieces.
By the late 1890s the genre of lied was firmly established in German concert life, while
also retaining its original function in the salon (Kravitt 1965, 207). Its audience would be
broad and cultured. Brahms did not intend to write liturgical pieces to be performed in a
church setting and thus understood that two things were required for a successful setting
of a Biblical text as lied: the use of the German language (namely Luther’s translation)
and minimal mention of God.

The text of song 1 is a rather unexpected choice, the Old Testament book of
Ecclesiastes. Although the idea of *vanitas* became a theme of seventeenth-century choral
and string music, settings of Ecclesiastes were very rare and it is not difficult to see why
(Christianson 2007, 77). Previously, the two types of Biblical texts that were most
frequently set were psalms and stories. Psalms were ideal for musical setting, because
they were originally written as music. Derived from the Greek word ἴσαλμος, “psalm”
means a “song” or “chant” accompanied by string instrument. King David composed
many of the songs at night, drawn to his harp by a gentle breeze that caused the strings to
vibrate (Terrien 2003, 10). The Psalms are the best examples of Hebrew poetry,
exhibiting strong organization and structure, distinct meter and rhythm, and ubiquitous
use of parallelism. Stories, however, were usually not found in Hebrew poetry. They
were drawn from both Old and New Testaments, particularly from the historical books,
prophets, and gospels. Oratorios could afford to set large portions of prose due to their
characteristic use of recitative. Brahms, however, chose neither a story nor a Psalm for
song 1. He chose a text from the particularly challenging category of wisdom literature.
Setting prose in art song was not typical, not only because of the German literary elitism
that came hand in hand with the lied tradition, but also for practical reasons – melody, phrasing and form. Prose texts do not lend themselves to regular phrasing and clearly-organized overall structure, unlike poems, which have these things inbuilt. Rather, prose seems to suggest through-composed form and irregular phrase structure, neither of which were commonplace in the genre of art song.

In song 1, Brahms sets a text from Ecclesiastes Chapter 3. Avoiding the well-known passage of parallels at the beginning of the chapter (starting with, “to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven” Ecclesiastes 3:1), he focuses on the end of the chapter. The writer’s thought begins in verse 18, when he compares mankind to beasts, saying: “I said in my heart, ‘Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals’” (NKJ) (Ecclesiastes 18). Brahms does not set this first verse, however, instead he begins with verse 19. This allows him to remain as “heathen” as possible, avoiding the thematically related but decidedly un-heathen text. Rather than address God’s interaction with man, Brahms chooses a text that revolves around the ultimate plight of man, death. At first reading, the text seems to reflect a Schopenhauerian pessimism, with statements like “all is in vain” and “all are made of dust and will to dust return” (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20). Nevertheless, the text is full of ambiguity and, at times, even hope. The text “Who knows if the spirit of man go upward, and the breath of the beast go downward under the earth?” (Ecclesiastes 3:21) not only provides an opportunity for word painting but also introduces a sense of uncertainty. This same feeling returns in verse 22: “For who can bring him to see what will be after him?” The author acknowledges that during this lifetime man does not have all the answers; he cannot know what will happen after death. Thus, “there is nothing better than that a man be joyful in his work” (Ecclesiastes 3: 22). In the midst of a dark text, there is still a message of joy and perhaps even a suggestion of hope.

The song begins with a two-measure piano introduction, featuring a scalar motive accompanied by a pedal A. Both the motive and the pitch A are integral to the song, and they are laid out together here, creating an atmosphere of sadness and ambiguity before the voice even sings the text of Ecclesiastes. The motive has a strong feeling of struggle; it travels up diatonically from D to F and back down in the first measure, then from D up to G and back down in the second (see Example 2.1).

There is a sense of effort in this motive and it is highlighted when the voice takes over in measures 3 and 4. The melody seems to be trying to make it all the way up to A, but it cannot, and it finally settles back on the tonic pitch, D, in measure 5. A is achieved briefly in measures 5 and 6, when the animal’s death is mentioned with the text “wie dies stirbt,” but it doesn’t receive the support of root-position tonic. When man’s death comes, “so stirbt er auch,” A is absent from the vocal line. Instead, a G-natural, rather than a G-sharp, leads down to F, rather than up to A, and even further down to tonic D. In another set of parallel phrases on repeated text, the animal’s death is set with a line that begins and ends on A, while man’s death again leads downward, away from A, ending on an unstable supertonic pitch while the piano plays a half cadence – tonicized by a secondary dominant – that leads into a short section in A. Thus, in the first 11 measures, Brahms sets up a sense of interplay by using both D and A as central pitches. The song is ostensibly in the key of D minor, but there is a nearly constant pedal tone on A in the accompaniment. Although A often acts to tonicize D, many of the passages which feature it are extended, giving it an importance of its own apart from the dominant-tonic relationship. Furthermore, Brahms uses an irregular phrase structure to perpetuate this sense of ambiguity. The two-measure introduction (mm. 1-2) is repeated in the voice but becomes a three-measure subphrase (mm. 3-5). Another subphrase leads to the cadence, six measures which can themselves be split into two (mm. 6-7) plus four (mm. 8-11).
2+3+2+4 is hardly a typical structure; even the listener’s sense of overall rhythm, in terms of phrases and subphrases, is made ambiguous.

A is even more important in measures 11 and 12, as the initial motive is slightly modified, appearing in a Phrygian mode on A as it retains the B-flat from the previous key, D minor. The accompaniment becomes more contrapuntal with the addition of more moving voices (the soprano and tenor), employing both C-sharp and C-natural in cross relation to emphasize the importance of A; it is at once major, minor, and Phrygian, but it is always A (see Example 2.2).

Example 2.2: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Denn es gehet dem Menschen,” meas. 10-12.

A also gains importance in the melody in measures 13 through 17. Three strong iterations of A precede an ascending scale beginning on the major mediant, climbing up to A, overshooting by a half-step to B-flat, re-correcting to G and finally finding its way back to A. Measures 16 and 17 contain a variant of the original scalar theme, but this time centered on A. A descending scale leads back to D and a recapitulation of the original scalar theme. This iteration is nearly identical to the first, but even more dramatic through its use of a tritone leap and suspension in measure 24 as Brahms sets the words “denn es ist alles eitel,” “for it is all vain.”

The Allegro begins in measure 26 with a combination scalar-arpeggiated diminished 7th sequence. Although it is ascending both melodically and in range (the bass rises a full three octaves over the course of the sequence), an overall descending
chromatic pattern is evident, with the scalar passages in bars 26, 28 and 30 descending from D to C-sharp to C and the arpeggios in bars 27, 29, and 31 descending from F to E to E-flat. Even in the accompaniment there is an ambiguity, a kind of vain struggle upward. The vocal line enters in measure 32 with an unusually long phrase. The length of the phrase (14 measures), the steady ascent to a high F, the running triplets juxtaposed with the hemiola effect in the right hand of the piano at measures 32-33 and 36-37, the sfp and crescendo-decrescendo markings, and the tonal ambiguity revolving around the diminished 7th all contribute to the heightened intensity of this phrase. This dramatic phrase sets one of the most bluntly fatalistic verses of the text: “All go to one place; all are made of dust and will to dust return” (Ecclesiastes 3:20). Here, we see again the effortful push up and roll back down that was introduced in the first few bars of the song. The first sub-phrase (seemingly built on a fifth from G to D) pushes from underneath the G (F-sharp) all the way up over the D to E-flat, only to fall quickly back down to F-sharp. The second subphrase is exactly the same, but one step higher and even more dramatic. Instead of attaining the height attempted by the first two subphrases, the third subphrase fizzles out, descending even lower than the tonic D to C-sharp. The accompaniment carries this idea to completion, repeating the final subphrase on the downbeats (B-flat – A – G – E – D – C-sharp) before the triplets gradually dissipate (see Example 2.3).

Example 2.3: Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge “Denn es gehet dem Menschen,” meas. 40-44.

Measure 46 marks a new section and a new mood. The strong block chords in the accompaniment, the return to a straightforward simple triple meter, the suddenly clear
Harmonies and the regular harmonic rhythm all add to a sense of determination. It seems far removed from the previous section’s running triplets, flowing melodic line, and pessimistic message. Here again, the idea of upward struggle is depicted in the setting of the three repetitions of “aufwärts fahre.” This setting is at once an example of literal word painting (the pitch rises on the word “aufwärts” or “upwards”) and another example of an ascending melodic idea that is repeated once at a higher pitch and then descends on its third iteration. Even this descent in the vocal line is balanced by upward motion in the accompaniment, which also begins on an E and ends on a G-sharp. A climax is reached on the first beat of measure 55, but the tension is dissipated with an interlude that brings back material from the end of Section 1: right-hand triplets and the very same intervallic theme found in measures 40-42 setting the text “und wird wieder zu Staub” – “and will return to dust.” The triplet material does not continue into the new theme, but it does serve to change its key center to C-sharp by reinforcing the dominant already alluded to at the end of the previous phrase. A new phrase is introduced at measure 60. It begins with an arpeggiated figure reminiscent of measures 46 through 49, but this time features downward motion on the text “unterwärts, unter die Erde” or “downwards, under the earth.” This descending melodic motion both serves as a word painting device and facilitates a mood change. The piano seems to give voice to two different characters, one ascending and one descending. Each ascending three-note figure in the tenor voice (measures 64, 66, and 68) is answered by a descending three-note figure in the soprano voice (measures 65, 67, and 69). The bass, which features ascending arpeggiated figures, leaps up an octave and a half – from E to C-sharp – before starting over even lower – C-sharp to F-sharp and finally, A to A; despite all of its upward efforts, it is consistently dragged back down (see Example 2.4).

Example 2.4: Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge “Denn es gehet dem Menschen,” meas. 64-70.
In measures 72 through 75, the bass features a descending diatonic scale against a pedal A, creating some close dissonances while allowing for a smooth transition back to D Minor. This section seems almost to die away, ending with a *diminuendo*, a gradual modulation back to D Minor, and a *ritardando*.

The setting of the word “darum” with the original scalar theme from the very first measures makes measure 76 feel like the beginning of a conclusion. However, the recalled material ends with the text “denn daß der Mensch fröhlich sei in seiner Arbeit.” This text is set with a variation of the expanded fifth phrase from the first Allegro (the phrase originally heard in measures 32-35). Centered around the interval G-D, the ascending scale begins a half-step lower than G and overshoots D by a half-step. It corrects itself, jumping down a minor third and stepping back up to D, and then settles on A (see Example 2.5).

Example 2.5: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Denn es gehet dem Menschen,” meas. 79-80.

The underlying harmony in measures 79 and 80 confirms this idea of the G-D fifth, as it strongly suggests a modulation to G minor. Brahms uses the ever-important A to pivot from this G minor sonority to a perfect authentic cadence in D minor. This brief pause on D major on the text “denn daß der Mensch fröhlich sei in seiner Arbeit” suggests that Brahms wants to downplay the importance of this text, but its major sonority carries a suggestion of hope. The phrase is extended past the failed HC in G minor to the eventual PAC in D minor, setting the text “denn das ist sein Teil.” This perfect authentic cadence
acts as a statement of acceptance as the author says, “for that is his lot,” accepting the struggles of life as necessary and proclaiming a man’s work as the ultimate purpose.

The piano introduction to the second Allegro is much like the first, using the same ascending scalar and diminished seventh arpeggio figure. However, this iteration takes on much more intensity through the use of stretto (see Example 2.6).

Example 2.6: Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge “Denn es geht dem Menschen,” meas. 82-87.

The figure piles on top of itself, appearing altogether five times rather than three. It is clear that a grand ending is approaching. The first sung phrase, in its original iteration accompanied by octave hemiolas in the right hand (measures 32-33, 36-37), is now balanced by a descending chromatic scale. The bass line in the accompaniment also slowly descends, starting at measure 88, from D to C to B to B-flat to A to G in measures 89-91. Above, the vocal line becomes increasingly dramatic, with large leaps and dissonances (including a descending 7th leap that ends on a dissonant note – an E in a cadential 6/4 chord – on the word “sehe”) while the right hand of the piano continuously trills, blurring the line between consonance and dissonance. Though the harmonic rhythm
is quite steady, the harmonies themselves are chromatic and not always functional. In measure 92 the voice lands on the ambiguous A, reflecting the text “who can bring him to see what will happen to him?” The minor dominant in measure 93 is unexpected and the product of a falling chromatic tenor line that goes from D at measure 92 to C-sharp to C to B to B-flat to A throughout the final measures. This descending tenor-register line also causes harsh dissonance in measures 94 and 95. Here, however, the harmonic rhythm slows down and the length of the notes increases, allowing these dissonances to have the maximum effect. The vocal line makes one last leap up to D on the word “geschehden” before ending on scale degree 5 on the final word, “wird.” This phrase is a plagal extension of the cadence at measures 92-93, with the penultimate harmony at measure 95 acting as a neighboring 6/4 to tonic. The use of a plagal extension rather than a strong authentic cadence, together with the melodic ending on scale-degree 5 help to articulate the question in the text: “Who can bring him to know what will happen to him?” The tension between D and A continues in the final measures of the accompaniment, with a pedal D in the left hand and an oscillating fifth figure in the right hand, which always ends on A. Two adamant D-minor chords end the song, re-establishing D as the dominant pitch but still not providing a satisfying dominant-tonic cadence. In these last eleven measures, we see again three lines of text in which the third is a reiteration of the second. Rather than the established pattern of ascending, ascending, descending, this final phrase takes a different approach. Its first subphrase, “Denn wer will ihn dahin bringen, daß er sehe,” includes a number of sudden descending leaps, whereas the second subphrase, “was nach ihm geschehden wird,” ascends to A and the third subphrase, “was nach ihm geschehden wird?” centers around A. Perhaps this is progress in the struggle; Sisyphus’s stone has remained at the top of the hill.

This first song, “Denn es gehet dem Menschen,” sets the mood of its Ecclesiastes text with two dichotomies: D versus A and ascending versus descending. D and A exist simultaneously as important harmonic and melodic pitches, just as the two ideas in the text – the inevitability of death and the necessity of taking joy in one’s work – exist in balance. It is at once fatalistic and ambiguous, but it is the ambiguity, alongside the near constant striving to move upwards, that allows for some light among the darkness. Brahms’s setting is both realistic and – in a small way – hopeful.
CHAPTER 3
“ICH WANDTE MICH UND SAHE”

“Ich wandte mich und sahe”

Ich wandte mich und sahe an alle, die Unrecht leiden unter der Sonne; und siehe, da waren Tränen, derer, die Unrecht litten und hatten keinen Tröster, und die ihnen Unrecht täten, waren zu mächtig, daß sie keinen Tröster haben konnten. Da lobte ich die Toten, die schon gestorben waren, mehr als die Lebendigen, die noch das Leben hatten; und der noch nicht ist, ist besser als alle beide, und des Bösen nicht inne wird, das unter der Sonne geschieht.

“I Turned and Saw”

I turned and saw all who suffer injustice under the sun; and behold, there were tears of those who suffered injustice and had no comforter, and those who did them injustice were too mighty to have any comforter. So I praised the dead who had already died, More than the living who still had life; but he who not yet is, is better than both, and does not perceive the evil that happens under the sun.

(Fischer-Dieskau 1984, 387)

For the second song in the cycle, Brahms again chose text from the book of Ecclesiastes. He used verses from the beginning of Chapter 4, those immediately following the text set in the previous song (3:19-22). These first three verses can be grouped into two sections: first, the author’s description of what he “turned and saw,” and second, the author’s conclusions about what he has seen, “so I praised…”. In the latter portion of text, Qoheleth argues that it is better to be dead, or even unborn, than to be living. Beller-McKenna calls verse 3 the “darkest moment in the cycle” and “the most radical, the most ‘Schopenhauerian’ line of text among the four songs” (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 211). He points to two important passages from Schopenhauer’s *The World as
Will and Representation as evidence of its similar message. The first, a quotation from Plutarch, reads: “Pity him who is born, because he faces so many evils; but the dead are to be accompanied with mirth and blessings because they have escaped from so many sufferings” (Schopenhauer 1966, 2:586). The second, a quotation from Plato’s Apology of Socrates, says: “Not to be born would be the best thing for man, never to behold the sun’s scorching rays; but if one is born, then one is to press as quickly as possible to the portals of Hades, and rest there under the earth” (Schopenhauer 1966, 2:586). Indeed, these passages sound strikingly similar to the Ecclesiastes text chosen for song 2. Thus, Beller-McKenna interprets the text of song 2 as saying: “Not only does death negate the advantages we thought we held in life (the message of the previous song), life itself, we now are told, is not worth living in the first place” (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 207). But there is another way to think about this passage. By placing the main focus on the first verse, which describes the injustice and evil in the world, it is possible to understand verses 2 and 3 as a means for emphasis. Rather than interpreting them literally (“life is not worth living in the first place”), we can see that they are intended to emphasize just how severe the suffering of this life is. In this way, the text stands in opposition to the text of the first song. If all we can do is take joy in our life and work, but our life is filled with suffering and injustice, then we are left with a dilemma. Where can we find happiness and joy? Although the text of this second song alludes to an absent comforter (“those who suffered injustice and had no comforter”), the musical setting looks forward to the comfort that might someday be given.

The connection between songs 1 and 2 is often evidenced by the G minor sonority that appears at the end of song 1. Indeed, G-minor is clearly important in measure 95 of song 1, both in the melody on the word “geschehen” and as part of a distinctive plagal cadence (see Example 3.1).

Even though what would be the dominant sonority (D) is minor here, the dominant-tonic relationship also acts as a strong connection between the two songs. This dominant-tonic motion suggests that the D minor of the first song is important but not complete; the two songs are significantly intertwined.

Song 2 begins with a descending G-minor arpeggio, a motive that winds its way throughout the entire song (see Example 3.2). Just as in the first song, the piano introduces a two-bar motive, which the voice repeats.


In the first six measures the harmonic rhythm is slow; in fact, Brahms spends a full four measures establishing the tonic sonority before straightforwardly moving to the more expected pace of the pre-dominant and dominant on the downbeats of measures 5 and 6.
Although the rhythm in the voice is simple (an anacrusis-laden quarter-half, quarter-half), the underlying accompaniment, which consists of block chords arranged as descending arpeggios, introduces a more complicated rhythm. Unlike the voice, which is clearly in simple triple meter (3/4), the piano’s use of constant eighth-notes and its placement of the left-hand bass notes on off-beats creates an ambiguity that is not clarified until measure 7. Rather than acting as a commentary on the simple text that it sets (“Ich wandte mich, und sahe an alle”), this rhythmic ambiguity seems to act as a way of emphasizing the text “die Unrecht” in measure 7. Here, the accompaniment very clearly articulates simple triple meter, with the descending third motive in the bass, three quarter notes clearly emphasizing three beats, with offbeat eight-notes in the right hand emphasizing the clear division of the beat. Also here in measure 7 the melody seems to get stuck, repeating the same note four times. Thus, Brahms seems to be drawing attention to measure 7 and the text “die Unrecht” (the injustice).

Measure 8 marks the beginning of Brahms’s use of dissonance, one of this song’s most effective word painting tools. The word “leiden” (suffer) is set with a string of suspensions between the vocal line and the top line of the accompaniment (see Example 3.3).

Example 3.3: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Ich wandte mich und sahe,” meas. 8.

This series of dissonances and resolutions serves to emphasize the downward motion of both melodic lines and enhance the text “die Unrecht leiden” (the injustice suffered). The
phrase is extended with a half cadence in measure 10 and a repetition of the text and music from measures 7 through 10. This time a greater sense of urgency is created by the repetition of the melody a third higher, a quicker harmonic rhythm, and a perfect authentic cadence.

In measure 15 there seems to be an abrupt shift in tone. The G-minor descending arpeggio appears again in the right hand of the accompaniment, but it has been harmonized with a I – iii – vi progression in E-flat major. Although this is not the relative major, it is a common third relationship and, even better, one that allows Brahms to introduce a raised scale degree 4 (A natural) (for example, in measures 18, 21, and 22), thus introducing the tritone above the tonic, that most potent of dissonances, into the harmonic vocabulary. Even more potent than the harmony is Brahms’s use of rhythmic dissonance in measure 15. While the soprano voice introduces a descending arpeggiated figure in clear triple meter, the alto and bass voices’ hemiola destabilizes this clear feeling of three. In measure 17 and 18, as the voice introduces the next image (“und siehe, siehe”), the accompaniment foreshadows a winding melisma that will later be used in the voice at two key moments in the song. With the words “da waren Tränen,” we again find the modified and re-harmonized descending arpeggio motive introduced by the piano four measures before. In fact, since the motive has been introduced previously in the accompaniment, the text seems to act as an interpretation of the musical idea. Brahms then adds emphasis to the word Tränen (tears) by repeating it and setting it with the winding melisma introduced a few measures earlier in the accompaniment (see Example 3.4). This is the first true melisma in the mostly syllabic and declamatory cycle and the result is a heightened sense of emotion; rather than a speech-like, text-driven vocal line, the melisma uses tones to express what text cannot.
Although the melisma contains two significant accidentals in the E-flat sonority (E natural and A natural), they do not sound strikingly dissonant, but rather expressively emotive. The melisma is harmonized with a first-inversion secondary dominant, prominently featuring an A natural in the bass and resolving it to B flat in the next measure. Thus, the C and the A natural in the bass line in measures 20 and 21 act as neighbor notes to the B flat in measure 22, much as the E natural and G in the vocal melisma act as neighbor notes to the final F on “-nen.” These chromatic neighbor notes add tension and emotive power to the text.

Measures 23 through 30 are a modified repetition of material from measures 7 through 14. “Die Unrecht litten” is once again set with a descending passage beginning on B flat. This time, however, a new text, “hatten keinen Tröster” (had no comforter), takes the melody down a step, introducing E natural and setting in motion a modulation from E-flat major back to G minor. It is as if the previous phrase had harbored hope for a comforter, but, corrected by the text, it returns to a state of sadness. Also here, in measure 25, the song becomes quite harmonically complex. A half-diminished seventh chord built on G-sharp resolves to a minor V chord, a secondary dominant in measure 26 leads not to V, but to a leading-tone diminished seventh, and finally the phrase ends on a half cadence at measure 30. Following the cadence, a series of ascending chromatic parallel thirds leads to the most remarkable moment in the song. At measure 31, the sonority suddenly
changes to G major; the piano overshoots on its way up to D, C sharp and E acting again as neighbor notes, but this time approaching the main tone from above instead of below (see Example 3.5). In the bass, Brahms transforms the descending arpeggio into an ascending, hopeful figure, emphasized by the use of octaves and a marked crescendo. Indeed, the bass is the clearest indicator of a characteristic hemiola, the same one that was first introduced in measure 15 and accompanied the first iteration of this phrase in measure 19. This time, the hemiola takes on added strength with the inclusion of an alto voice hemiola and staccato ascending arpeggios in the tenor voice which also follow the hemiola rhythm (see Example 3.5).

Example 3.5: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Ich wandte mich und sahe,” meas. 31-32.

The words “keinen Tröster” are set with the same melisma used for “Tränen” in measure 21, but this time a third higher. Although the text here, “keinen Tröster” (no comforter), seems quite hopeless, Brahms’s setting dramatically argues otherwise. “Haben” is also set with a dramatic melisma, again using a string of ascending neighbor notes (see Example 3.6).
Example 3.6: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Ich wandte mich und sahe,” meas. 34-35.

The melisma’s rhythm only heightens its expressivity, with an eighth note-quarter note rhythm placing the emphasis on the off-beat and the use of a triplet to hurriedly catch up to beat one in measure 35. After having described the darkness of injustice and evil, and although the text claims there is none, Brahms’s music dares to hope for a comforter.

The mood changes again in measure 36, when the original descending G-minor arpeggio returns. This moment marks the second half of the text, which elaborates on the injustice and suffering in the world. Unlike the original descending arpeggio that jumps up from B flat to A natural (mm. 4 and 5), this arpeggio makes it all the way down to a low G (m. 39) on the word “Toten” (the dead). This time the accompaniment is simple, with block chords and slow harmonic rhythm. It is a respectful moment, sadly but reverently remembering those who have died. The phrase is repeated on the text “mehr als die Lebendigen, die noch das Leben hatten” (more than the living, those who still have life), but this iteration is more harmonically complex. It introduces an augmented sonority built on the flat seventh degree in measure 49 (which is, in fact, a kind of extended retardation in which the dissonant note is dwelt upon for a whole measure, resolving to D minor), a minor V chord, and a secondary dominant (see Example 3.7).
Example 3.7: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Ich wandte mich und sahe,” meas. 49-51.

These chords suggest an allusion to D minor, referring back to song 1, the great ode to death, and reminding the listener of the lot of the living. The real suffering of life is the fear of death. In song 1, the author muses on the inevitability of death. A passage from Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* may shed light on this connection:

… the consciousness of animals is a mere succession of present events, none of which, however, exists as future before its appearance, or as past after its disappearance, this being the distinctive characteristic of human consciousness. Therefore the animals have infinitely less to suffer than have we, since they know no other sufferings than those directly brought about by the present. But the present is without extension; the future and the past, on the other hand, which contain most of the causes of our sufferings, are widely extended. To their actual content the merely possible is added, whereby an unlimited field is opened up to desire and fear. The animals, on the other hand, are undisturbed by these; they peacefully and serenely enjoy every present moment, even if it is only bearable. In this they may be approached by human beings of very limited capacity. Further, the sufferings that belong solely to the present can be merely physical. Animals do not really feel even death; they can get to know it only when it appears, and then they already are no more. Thus the life of the animal is a continual present. (Schopenhauer 1966, 1:60-61)

By the brief allusion to the D-minor tonality on the text “mehr als die Lebendigen, die noch das Leben hatten,” Brahms points to the fear of the future and of death (portrayed in song 1) as the ultimate suffering. The dead do not have a past or a future. They do not
have to fear, because they have transcended the boundaries of time, the cause of suffering.

In measures 52 through 60, Brahms again displays reverence, this time for the unborn. The text “und der noch nicht ist” (and he who is not yet) is set with the descending arpeggiated motive, here a whole step lower and marked pianissimo with an added decrescendo. This phrase also acts as the turning point from a flat-centered tonality to a sharp-centered tonality. The arpeggio is cut off before it can finish; instead of its lowest note, there is a full measure of silence. This moment of silence seems to be a preparation for the statement which will follow: “ist besser als alle beide” (is better than both of them). Brahms understands the gravity of this statement and sets it very carefully. Measure 56 marks the beginning of a chain of chords that lead directly to the final phrase.

The final phrase sets the text “und des Bösen nicht inne wird, das unter der Sonne geschieht” (and does not perceive the evil that happens under the sun). It is significant that this text is marked by a new key signature and a new section; despite the word “und,” it is disconnected from the previous idea. This allows it to stand on its own as a passage of hope - that one day we ourselves might not perceive the evil that happens under the sun. It begins in measure 61, with a kind of stretto made up of descending triad arpeggios and finally ending in a major seventh sonority (see Example 3.8).

Example 3.8: Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge “Ich wandte mich und sahe,” meas. 61-62.

When the melody falls down a seventh on “Bösen” (evil), it is clear that the harmonizing chord is in fact an $A_6^5$ with a suspension. Despite the melody’s leap down a seventh, it
jumps back up to repeat the phrase a step higher. This phrase again stacks up descending thirds until it forms a G major seventh chord (on “wird”), with a suspension in the tenor voice resolving to the root. By finally breaking free of these stacked seventh chords, which are not used anywhere else in the song, Brahms also breaks free of the idea of “Bösen” (“evil”) that was tied to that musical figure, effectively setting the text “und des Bösen nicht inne wird” (literally, “and the evil will not hold”). In one last triumphant push upwards, the melody reaches up to a D and finally an E (m. 66) as the bass ascends G-A-B, F#-G-A-B-C-C#-D in measures 65 through 68. G major is clearly established as the home key and a series of suspensions over a pedal G only serve as reinforcement (see Example 3.9).


The song ends softly, with a light G-major chord. Brahms takes a dramatically pessimistic text from Ecclesiastes and imbues it with hope; hope for a comforter and for the abolishment of evil.
CHAPTER 4

“O TOD, WIE BITTER BIST DU”

“O Tod, wie bitter bist du”

O Tod, o Tod, wie bitter bist du,
wen an dich gedenket ein Mensch,
der gute Tage und genug hat und ohne
Sorge gelebet;
und dem es wohl geht in allen Dingen
und noch wohl essen mag!
O Tod, o Tod, wi bitter bist du.
O Tod, wie wohl tust du dem
Dürftigen,
der da schwach und alt ist,
der in allen Sorgen steckt,
und nichts Bessers zu hoffen
noch zu erwarten hat.
O Tod, o Tod, wie wohl tust du.

“O death, how bitter you are”

O death, O death, how bitter you are
in the thoughts of a man
who has good days, enough and a
sorrow-free life;
and who is fortunate in all things
and still pleased to eat well!
O death, O death, how bitter you are!
O death, how well you serve him who is
in need,
who is feeble and old,
is beset by all sorrows
and has nothing better to hope for
or to expect,
O death, O death, how well you serve.

(Fischer-Dieskau 1984, 387-88)

Song 3, “O Tod, wie bitter bist du,” is commonly regarded as the heart of the
cycle. Eric Sams, Craig Bell, and others have gone so far as to name measures 17 and 18
as the climax of the entire set. Indeed, the breathtaking shift from E minor to E major in
measure 17 and the ascending vocal leap in measure 19 is a particularly effective
example of word painting. There is no doubt that it was meant to express the text but it
might also have been meant to comment upon the text. Various interpretations of this
song’s meaning exist; Malcolm Boyd claims that “after the beautiful, valedictory phrases
with which the third song finally embraced death…it is too late now; even for charity”
(Boyd 1967, 595). Craig Bell sees death depicted “first as enemy and then as friend” and
calls it “one of the most harrowing expressions of the human spirit ever penned” (Bell
1996, 162). Lani Johnson sees the turn from minor to major as a turn from despair to

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“something approximating acquiescence to the reality of death,” “at least stoicism” or “acceptance” (Johnson 2006, 385-88). Finally, Daniel Beller-McKenna argues that Brahms is trying to express “the faith of the early Romantics in the divine power of love” (Johnson 2006, 394). Although each of these explanations is well-argued and plausible, they all imply a sort of reluctant acceptance of death stemming from exhaustion.

Brahms’s musical setting expresses no such reluctance; rather, it seems sincere. The music of song 3 sincerely presents the idea of Christian hope. Death becomes positive because of the faith that the afterlife will be better than this present life.

The text of “O Tod, wie bitter bist du” is taken from the book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus. Although it is an apocryphal book, it was included in Martin Luther’s 1545 *Deutsche Bibel*. According to Tarald Rasmussen, it was seen as “not equal to the Holy Scripture, but still useful and profitable to read” (Rasmussen 2010, 147). It does not formally have anything in common with the book of Ecclesiastes, despite their similarly translated titles, but the passage chosen by Brahms highlights the common theme of death established in the texts of the first two songs. The first song suggests the inevitability of death and the second song remarks upon the suffering and injustice of life; the third song looks forward to death as the end of all suffering.

The logical connection between the songs’ texts is played out in their musical settings. The opening motive of song 3 is drawn directly from the descending arpeggiated motive of song 2. In fact, it is even more closely related to the descending thirds in measures 61 and 62 of song 2, where Brahms sets the text “und des Bösen” (and the evil) (see Examples 4.1 and 4.2).

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8 Brahms owned an 1833 copy of the Lutheran Bible, which is housed at the Archiv of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna.


This collection of thirds is ideal because it outlines an E-minor triad, the key of the third song, and because it includes the sixth scale degree, which Brahms consistently plays with in this song to create tension. The first five measures are full of tension and careful voice leading. In every measure the submediant scale-degree appears in a different form; measure 1 emphasizes C natural, measure 2 includes a cross-relation between C natural in the voice and C sharp in the accompaniment followed by the voice, measure 3 reverses this cross-relation, moving from C sharp in the piano to C natural in the descending vocal line, and measures 4 and 5 feature C natural and C sharp respectively. In measure 5, the C sharp is even more unexpected, as it turns the typically minor subdominant chord into a major sonority. Throughout these first five measures the accompaniment consistently lands heavily on beat 1 (with the exception of measure 4, which acts as a rhythmic
preparation for the cadence) and resolves up by either a half or a whole step. Many of these half-step resolutions require chromaticism and thus make the song more slippery harmonically; the harmonies often do not function as we might expect them to and the key of E minor is not firmly established until the atypical modally inflected IV-V half cadence in measure 5.

The next phrase, beginning at measure 6, marks a sudden change in surface rhythm, intensity, and mood. The syllabic quarter- and eighth-note text setting is markedly different from the half-notes and flowing lines in the first five measures. The accompaniment also reflects this change, with a strong bass note (usually in octaves) on every quarter note, emphasizing the half-beat, and with nearly constant moving eighth notes. The effect is that the speaker is trying to move through this text as quickly as possible. Rhythmic dissonance in the accompaniment in measures 6 and 7 (the right hand seems to suggest a hemiola of 2 beats + 2 beats + 2 beats against the triple meter – see Example 4.3) gives way to simple quarter notes in the bass and light offbeats in the right hand. As was established in song 2, the life described here (“good days, enough and a sorrow-free life,” “fortunate in all things and still pleased to eat well”) is not reality. The speaker does not want to dwell on the idea of a sorrow-free life because he has already shown that all life is full of sorrow. This first section of the song, including the repetition of the first phrase in measures 13 through 17, serves as a point of comparison rather than a realistic statement.

Example 4.3: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “O Tod, wie bitter bist du,” meas. 6-7.
Measure 18 is approached much like measures 1 and 12; there is an anacrusis on B and an E on the downbeat in the bass. However, instead of the descending E-minor triad that defined the first phrase, the B descends to G sharp in the tenor voice, marking a dramatic change in modality and mood. Instead of descending to C natural, the bass jumps up to C sharp, and then again from A up to F sharp. Even the new middle voices provide upward motion. The real emotional potency, however, comes when the voice enters in measure 19. The text, “O Tod, wie wohl tust du dem Dürftigen” (O death, how well you serve him who is in need”), addresses death, just as the first line does, but this time sees something positive in it. The original leap from dominant to mediant on the words “O Tod” is transformed; not only does the voice leap up instead of down, but it lands on the sharped mediant, re-affirming the new major tonality (see Examples 4.4 and 4.5).


Example 4.5: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “O Tod, wie bitter bist du,” meas. 20.

The change of tonality is accompanied by a change in meter and a new figure in the piano. The shift from triple meter to duple meter that occurred in measure 18 allows the word “Tod” to be held twice as long as it was in its original iteration, emphasizing the
sweetness of the G sharp. The piano dynamic marking and the small, rounded “o” vowel also signal a different attitude toward “Tod”, helping to make this moment especially poignant and intimate. Brahms also uses a wash of sound to create a peaceful atmosphere. The right hand of the piano contains a string of suspensions that never fully resolve because of moving bass and tenor parts and pedal notes in the soprano. All of this dissonance, however, is grounded by a strong bass line and a functional chord progression. The mood changes again with a deceptive cadence in measure 24. The series of suspensions, which have led to a lower range in the accompaniment, gives way to heavier quarter note chords in measure 25. The harmonic rhythm becomes quite stagnant, with IV as the principal sonority and D- and F-natural chromatic alterations creating a darker atmosphere. The text here is reminiscent of the message of song 2: that life is full of sorrow and suffering. Having already described one type of life (sorrow-free and fortunate) and its reaction to death, the text now describes another type of life, a man who, according to the text, “schwach und alt is, der in allen Sorgen steckt, und nichts Bessers zu hoffen noch zu erwarten hat” (is feeble and old, beset by all sorrows and has nothing better to hope for or to expect). Because of the texts set in the first two songs, the speaker appears to identify with the second type of man and Brahms communicates that message. The darkest moment in the song comes in measures 27 and 28, with the text “und nichts Bessers zu hoffen.” The harmony appears to move towards C# but the modulation is never fully realized (the Augmented 6th chord in measure 27 leads to a second-inversion C# chord in measure 28 which never fulfills its function as a cadential 6/4), harsh dissonance is featured (D sharp does not belong in either sonority but is emphasized in the vocal line), the range is low, and the melody descends by step. The music expresses that there is no worse fate than the loss of hope.

In contrast, the word “erwarten” (expect) is set with a long melisma that features modal mixture, including a C natural – a flat scale-degree 6, expected in a minor mode but not here in E major – and a G natural – scale-degree 3, the primary defining pitch in the determination of major vs. minor mode. The G natural appears in juxtaposition with its major-mode equivalent, G sharp, which was heard only a beat and a half earlier (see Example 4.6).

This brief return to the minor tonality suggests that one cannot hope for or expect anything in this life. Ending on an ascending melody and a half cadence, this phrase seems to demand a response. The response is a reiteration of the ascending leap from measure 19.

The final section of this third song looks forward to the next life, seeing death as the gateway out of a life of suffering and into something better. The ascending sixth, already so effective in its first appearance, is sung twice, the second time a fourth higher. The bass also participates in the motive, leaping up a sixth from E to C sharp in measure 31 and then, again, in measure 32, from A to F sharp. The melodic material that once set the word “Dürftigen” (needy) now sets “wohl” (well) and, in a slower rhythm, feels more conclusive. This final phrase is repeated a third lower and ends on a decisive perfect authentic cadence. Throughout the final ten measures of the song, the piano accompaniment seems to push forward with a strong emphasis on the offbeat reminiscent of measures 18 through 24, and finally ends with a thoroughly consonant ascending E-major arpeggio. This final section communicates hope for life after death. Although the text displays, at best, an acquiescence to or acceptance of death, the musical setting highlights death as the end of suffering and looks forward with hope to what will come after.
CHAPTER 5

“WENN ICH MIT MENSCHENZUNGEN”


“Wenn ich mit Menschenzungen”

If I spoke with the tongues of men and angels, and had not love, I were a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And if I could prophesy and knew all mysteries and all knowledge, and had all faith so that I could remove mountains, and had not love, I were nothing.

If I gave away all my goods to the poor and suffered my body to be burned, and had not love, it were of no gain to me. We see now in obscure words through a mirror, but then face to face. Now I discern it piece by piece, but then I shall discern it just as I am discerned. But now faith, hope, love remain, these three: but love is the greatest among them.

(Fischer-Dieskau 1984, 388)
Song 4 has been criticized by as the weakest of the four and significantly different from the first three in both theme and content. Indeed, it seems to stand apart from the others in many ways. It is the only song with a New Testament text, it is the only song with an overtly positive message, it is the only song that begins and ends in a major key, and it creates a much different atmosphere from those evoked by the first three songs. The first three songs are often thought of as a group – Malcolm Boyd argues that “the first three songs seem to have been conceived as a unit in a way which is not only felt instinctively by the receptive listener but is also demonstrable by analysis” – thus causing the fourth song to be even more isolated (Boyd 1967, 595). Boyd continues that the song “really has no place in this cycle, and least of all after the beautiful, valedictory phrases with which the third song finally embraced death…it is too late now; even for charity” (Boyd 1967, 595). For many critics it is not only out of place, but also intrinsically weaker than the first four songs. Brahms song scholar Eric Sams says that “of the Four Serious Songs, the last (fine though it is) is usually felt to be the least compelling. Unlike the first three, it lacks the sense of being the definitive expression of its text” (Sams 1972, 65). Craig Bell suggests that it is also not helped by its position immediately following the exceptional and heart-rending third song, “O Tod, wie bitter bist du”, saying: “coming as it does immediately after one of the most searing pieces of music ever written, the first half of it at least, with its near-jaunty rhythm that does not suit the words anyway, can only be felt as an anticlimax, a shrug of forced optimism…” (Bell 1996, 164).

Because of the seeming incongruities between the final song and the rest of the cycle, some critics and scholars even decry the inclusion of the fourth song in the cycle. One argument claims that Brahms felt that the first three songs were too personal and thus wanted to temper them with a broader and more positive message. Malcolm Boyd argues that since “there is nothing at all in this text to relate it to the others in the cycle…one is naturally drawn to look for some outside reason for its inclusion. The most likely explanation seems to be that Brahms felt that the extremely personal confession contained in the first three songs would not on its own find general acceptance; and he may also have been reluctant to expose himself in this way” (Boyd 1967, 594). This explanation lacks potency. It comes dangerously close to the biographical fallacy, assuming that Brahms’s expression of the text is necessarily an expression of his own
thoughts. Furthermore, since, as the first three songs suggest, personal expression was important to him, composing a false expression would run counter to his artistic integrity.

An alternative explanation for this song’s inclusion in the cycle comes from Lani Johnson, who says that “with these words, Brahms expressed his feelings of failure, or, at least, his ambivalence about the import of his life…The final message…which unfolds rationally from the text of the first three songs, is a sword’s jab in his own wound. We see Brahms considering and summing up his own life” (Johnson 2006, 385). This explanation seems to miss the point of the text, focusing solely on its first section (verses 1-3) and even more on its negative implications. Johnson reads Brahms as insincere even though his setting sounds more uplifting than ironic. It is unlikely that Brahms meant this final song to reflect upon man’s failings; its focus is on love and hope, not earthly shortcomings.

Another argument claims that “the music might well have been in Brahms’s mind, if not actually on paper, some years before the others were written” (Boyd 1967, 595). It has been suggested that the I Corinthians text entered Brahms’s consciousness in 1892 at the funeral service of his close friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg (Kalbeck 1904, 451-54). Consequently, “Wenn ich mit Menschzungen” has been called both a recollection of their friendship (Boyd 1967, 595) and a demonstration of unrequited love, “a decidedly unPauline epistle addressed to amor rather than caritas” (Sams 1972, 65). Sketches for the four songs appear together and Brahms always discussed them as a set, so if Brahms had the fourth song in mind before the others, there is no evidence that he wrote it down until he had also started work on the other three. Moreover, although Brahms must have heard the reading of I Corinthians at Elisabeth’s funeral, four years seems a rather long time to contain his feelings, whether friendly or romantic. Thus, the funeral might have placed the text in his mind as an effective passage, but this song is likely not directly related to his feelings towards Elisabeth. It is most likely that Brahms carefully chose and set the text for song 4 in order to express a specific idea. And indeed, there is a clearer connection between the fourth song and the rest of the cycle than there might initially appear to be.

In this fourth song, Brahms performs an about-face, turning from the texts of Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus to I Corinthians 13, an uplifting ode to love. The text can
be thought of in three sections: verses 1-3 (a set of “if-and” compound sentences), verse 12 (two “now-then” sentences), and verse 13, the conclusion. Brahms’s setting acknowledges the independence of these three sections, changing key at each new portion of text. These changes are so abrupt that Arnold Whittall described them as “so obvious…that one might suspect Brahms of skepticism about the value of the Art of Transition” (Whittall 1983, 201). Brahms was aware of and even highlighted the independence of the three sections of text chosen for the fourth song.

The first section, consisting of verses 1-3, clearly lends itself to a musical setting. Each of its three sentences is divided into three clear sections: “if I…”, “and had not love”, and “I were…” Moreover, the phrase “and had not love” acts as an interior refrain, reappearing as the mid-point in each sentence. This not only allows for melodic continuity – Brahms sets this phrase with the same melody at each repetition – but also highlights the theme of love, which returns at the end of the song. These verses are also full of vivid images: “a sounding brass,” “a clanging cymbal,” “I could move mountains” and “allowed my body to be burned.” These verses are practically appropriate for musical setting, with almost in-built phrasing, while also expressing a key spiritual idea. It is less clear why Brahms chose to omit verses 4 through 11 when choosing the text for song 4. Verses 4 through 7, perhaps the most familiar to modern ears, are surprisingly passed over as they are an overt description of love, that quality which seems to be at the center of this song. They say: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (NIV). Perhaps it is the list-like nature of these verses that discouraged Brahms from using them; they would be more difficult to divide into phrases or to set with common melodic material. In fact, the whole passage, which is based on rhetorical repetition, doesn’t lend itself to musical setting as it wouldn’t make sense to express each brief idea. But Brahms might also have been aware of the need to steer towards broad ideas (the idea of love) and away from moralizing (do not envy, do not boast, do not dishonor others, etc.). He also omits verses 8 through 11, which say “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass
away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what
is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I
reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me”
(NIV). Perhaps Brahms doesn’t use these verses because their sentiment is adequately
summed up in verse 12, or even because of a concern for the length of the song, but it is
most likely because these verses utilize the same rhetorical repetition as verses 4 through
7, a device which would be difficult to set effectively to music.

Verse 12 presents two “now-then” statements: “Now we see but a poor reflection
as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully
even as I am fully known” (NIV). Daniel Beller-McKenna recognizes verse 11 as a
similar “now-then” statement, but does not wonder why Brahms chose not to set the first
of three parallel sentences. The text of verse 11, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to
childish ways,” presents a past-present dichotomy. This stands in opposition to the
present-future dichotomy expressed in the second two statements. Indeed, this focus on
the future (life after death) is a continuation of the journey taken in the first three songs:
the inevitability of death, the suffering of life, the hope of better life after death, and, here
in the fourth song, the concrete image of what life after death will be like. Thus, it was
important that the focus of the text be on the future.

Beller-McKenna emphasizes the importance of the mirror metaphor in verse 12.
He argues that it “stands conspicuously outside of the typical Biblical imagery” and that
it anticipates both the Romantic philosophies of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and
Friedrich Hölderlin and parallels Schopenhauer’s mirror metaphor as expressed in The
World As Will and Representation (Beller-McKenna 1994a, 195-98). These ideas, though
compellingly argued, seem to overestimate the importance of philosophical influence and
underestimate the spiritual aspect of Brahms’s text choice. Although mirror imagery is
rare in the Bible, it does appear two other times in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians
3:18 and James 1:23 (Ryken 1998, 560). Each time, the image is used for a slightly
different purpose, but here in I Corinthians, Paul claims that what we see now, in a
mirror, is only a poor reflection compared to what we will see in the next life. Leland
Ryken’s Dictionary of Biblical Imagery makes an important observation and a
compelling explanation of these verses. First, the statement can be more clearly grasped with the understanding that mirrors in Paul’s time did not produce the bright, clear images we see in mirrors today but instead produced cloudy, inferior images. Even more significant, Ryken claims, is the idea that “the Christian can only see and understand God through secondary means…such as human expressions of love (1 Cor 13) or Scripture itself (James 1:25)” (Ryken 1998, 560). These “intermediary means” will become unnecessary once the Christian finally sees God “face to face.” Here then, in this seemingly “heathen” or Romantic text, there are implicit, if not outright, references to God. Indeed, the phrases “we shall see face to face” and “I shall know fully even as I am fully known” may imply another person who the speaker will see and know. This person must be slightly obscured in this life while fully accessible in the next and must know the hearts and minds of human beings completely. Thus this passage possibly refers to a loving God. It becomes more understandable, then, why Brahms might have chosen this verse, even while omitting a parallel sentence from verse 11. It can be seen as a reference to God and, more specifically, God as understood through the Christian faith. Beller-McKenna makes a connection to Hegel’s philosophy and his use of the mirror metaphor, saying that “Love, which ‘is the divinity,’ can only take place when we recognize ourselves in the object,” against the mirror, against the echo of our existence.” And in this divinity we recognize ourselves, but ‘cannot grasp’ the miracle that ‘he is still not we,’ and so we see only ‘dimly’” (Hegel 1987, 261-62). Schopenhauer also used the mirror metaphor. In his philosophy, the Will sees its representation – the world – as in a mirror. In The World As Will and Representation, Schopenhauer argues that “in this mirror the Will knows itself in increasing degrees of distinctness and completeness, the highest of which is man…And, looking into this mirror, we recognize our innermost self, the kernel of our will” (Schopenhauer 1966, 1:274-75, 302). As a well-read man, Brahms was most likely aware of the use of the mirror metaphor in Hegel and Schopenhauer, but each of these three interpretations – Paul’s Christianity, Romantic spiritual philosophy as demonstrated by Hegel, and Schopenhaurian pessimism – has a unique context and meaning. Paul’s use of the mirror metaphor stands alone in its reference to heaven, or life after death, and a knowing, loving God. Therefore, Brahms’s setting, which alludes to a positive afterlife, seems to be most akin to Paul’s conception of the mirror image.
The final verse returns to Earth after verse 12’s brief glimpse into heaven. The words “But now” at the beginning of the sentence seem to answer the question: granted that heaven will be wonderful, what do we do now? Paul testifies that within the limits of this present life, our only means of seeing and understanding God, even if incompletely, are faith, hope, and love. The idea that love is the greatest virtue falls in line with Romantic ideals and helps to achieve the secular quality that would encourage these songs to be taken seriously in the Lieder tradition, but this text nevertheless retains a strong spiritual quality that speaks to the idea of Christian love and the hope of life after death.

“Wenn ich mit Menschenzungen” begins in the key of E-flat major, a long way away from the calm E major in which the previous song concluded. The key of E-flat major and its designated characteristics were known among 18th- and 19th-century composers and audiences. It was considered a heroic and majestic key, partly because of its association with the brass family and partly because of a long history of well-known heroic pieces in the key of E-flat, including Beethoven’s Fifth Piano Concerto (the “Emperor”), Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, Schumann’s Third Symphony (the “Rhenish”), and most notably, Beethoven’s Third Symphony (the “Eroica”). It has also been suggested that the key carries a spiritual – and particularly Christian – quality because of its three flats, often seen as a symbolic representation of the Holy Trinity in Bach’s works and specifically the E-flat major fugue for organ, BWV 552 (“St. Anne”) (Ross 1974, 331). By choosing E-flat major, Brahms was participating in this legacy of majestic works. By choosing a key a half-step (and seven accidentals) away from the previous song, he was also perhaps acknowledging the apparent differences between the text of the fourth song and what came before it. Even so, the transition is made less abrupt by starting the fourth song on an A-flat major chord, IV in the key of E-flat major but a sonority that shares a significant common tone – A flat/G sharp – with the final chord of song 3. The E-flat sonority is not reached until the second measure and not clearly defined in the voice until the fourth measure. In this way, the song eases into the distant key of E-flat major.

The first section of the song is comprised of the first 47 measures. Its phrasing and rhythm very clearly follow the punctuation and scansion of the text and result in
speech-like syllabic accentuation. The three “if-but” statements are set similarly, with slight variations for extra “if” statements. Each return of the text “und hätte der Liebe nicht” is set with the same melodic material, a triadic figure followed by a held note accentuating the word “Liebe.” Likewise, each return of the conditional verb “so wäre” is set with an ascending scale leading to two rapidly falling descending third arpeggios. These arpeggios are reminiscent of the “O Tod” theme from song 3 and seem to reinforce the negative outcome of a life lived without love (or, as is ultimately clear, without God). The voice finishes this first section in measure 46, while the piano accompaniment provides a two-measure transition, ending on a G-flat-major dominant chord. This chord – enharmonically an F-sharp dominant seventh – acts as the dominant of B major, the key of the next section of music.

B Major is enharmonically C flat, bVI in the home key. This section can be heard as an expanded chromatic submediant, a sonority often associated with other-worldliness – especially in German Romantic Lieder. This other-worldliness, created by the tertial modulation, seems to suggest the distance between this life and the next. The new atmosphere is reinforced by a softer dynamic, a slower tempo (Adagio), a new meter (3/4) a dolce indication, and flowing arpeggiated triplets in the accompaniment. The text of the second section, as discussed earlier, contains two “now-then” statements, focusing on the hopeful aspect of the “then,” life after death. The two “now-then” statements are set with similar melodies. The vocal lines are long and flowing, everything one would expect of a Romantic lied. With each iteration of the text “dann aber” (but then), the melody leaps down a seventh, only to rise over an octave with a sense of hopefulness.

Just as quickly and suddenly as this section began, it ends in measures 72-75. The accompaniment finishes with a German augmented sixth chord and falls a half step back onto the dominant of E-flat major. Here the initial melodic and thematic material from the first section returns – where the text was once “wenn ich” (if I), it has now become “nun aber” (but now). At the same time, this “but now” acts a response to the hope of the next life expressed in the second section and the musical material brings the listener back to the practicalities of life found in the “if-but” statements of the first section. However, this return to the original melodic material is short-lived. The words “faith” and “hope”
are set with large leaps, both emphasizing speech-like syllabic accents and increasing the dramatic intensity (see Example 5.1).

Example 5.1: Brahms *Vier ernste Gesänge* “Wenn ich mit Menschenzungen,” meas. 78-82.

“Hoffnung” is one step higher than “Glaube,” and when “Liebe” is reached, the melody soars to its highest point, G4. Accompanied by a secondary dominant, this G (or its optional replacement, E-natural) is not only the pinnacle of the melodic phrase and arguably the song, but it is also a striking dissonance, and thus, even more effective in its evocation of emotion. In the final phrase, the melody and triplet accompaniment from the second section returns, but this time in the home key, E-flat major. The voice and the piano share the melodic content in parallel sixths, finally in unison rather than imitation (see Example 5.2).

The last clause of the text “but love is the greatest among them” is stated twice, set with the melody from both the “now” and “but then” sections. In this way, love is recognized both as the ultimate fulfillment in the next life – seeing God face to face – and as the only way to understand God in this life. Brahms ends softly and introspectively with three E-flat major chords. His cycle is concluded with a positive and unambiguous message about the meaning of life and the hope of death.
CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS: OPTIMISM AND HOPE IN THE *VIER ERNSTE GESÄNGE*

The observation of expressive musical details in each of the four songs of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* has allowed for a different view of one of Brahms’s extraordinary late works. In song 1, a text from Ecclesiastes 3 acknowledges the inevitability of death (“Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other” NIV). According to the speaker, the only comfort that can be found is in one’s work. Although this song is musically the darkest of the four, rarely venturing out of the minor mode, Brahms’s setting still uses a sense of tonal ambiguity and a constant upward striving to temper the dark text, allowing for a sense of hope.

In song 2, another text from Ecclesiastes laments the suffering of life and the absence of a comforter. In what many scholars interpret as the darkest piece of text in the cycle, the speaker admits that those who are not yet born are more fortunate than both the living and the dead because they do not have to endure the suffering of an earthly life. Brahms’s musical setting uses ascending melodic lines, a major tonality in the final measures, and brief moments of Romantic emotional expressivity to communicate hope for a comforter rather than complete despair over the lack of one. This song conveys a belief that one day, evil will be abolished and suffering will end.

Song 3, viewed by many as the heart of the cycle, sets a dual text, which first proclaims the bitterness of death and then its beauty. The song’s placement after the first two songs suggests that, since no one is immune to the sufferings of life, death can be thought of positively. Brahms’s setting, and particularly the dramatic and effective transition from E minor to E major in measure 17, may be understood as his looking forward to the abolishment of suffering and the hope of a new life after death.
Finally, song 4, the most overtly positive song in the set, looks forward to the next life, when we shall see God “face to face.” It is seen by many as the weakest of the four, mostly because it does not participate in the “dismal Romantic” as the first three songs do, and its place in the cycle is even questioned because of its more positive message. The song proclaims the primacy of love, as both the great reward of the next life and the only way to fully know God in this life. It serves as a continuation of ideas from the first three songs and a fulfillment of the subtle hope expressed in those songs. Brahms’s choice of texts, his purposeful ordering of them, and his musical setting of them communicate a message of hope and love even while addressing the difficulty of the human life.

Brahms’s *Vier ernste Gesänge* is an extraordinary cycle composed under trying circumstances. With death becoming a near constant in his life and with his own mortality at the forefront of his thoughts, Brahms turned to his spirituality to help answer his difficult questions. Familiar with the Bible since childhood, Brahms prided himself on his knowledge of scripture and theology. It was the death of Robert Schumann, however, that inspired Brahms to develop a genuine interest in the Bible, both as a philosophical and cultural text and as a spiritual guide. In *Ein deutsches Requiem*, in the motet “Warum ist das Licht gegeben dem Mühseligen?” and in other choral pieces, Brahms’s musical settings of Biblical text demonstrate his knowledge and understanding of the Bible. But only once did Brahms’s interest in Biblical texts overlap with his gift for composing art song. Armed with knowledge of Arthur Schopenhauer and his philosophy of the aesthetic genius, Brahms sought to express his understanding of death and holy love through the medium of music, an art form that, as the philosopher saw it, was uniquely suited to convey depth of emotion. Brahms communicated his knowledge of “the eternal Ideas” (Jacquette 2005, 150), to confirm the universal human condition – inevitable death, lifelong suffering, and fear of the unknown – and to offer some answers. The intimate and expressive genre of lied was a perfect medium for engaging such philosophical and spiritual concerns. Although Brahms was careful not to “preach” to his audience of nineteenth-century concert-goers and drawing-room-singers with too much Christian imagery or moralizing, his text choices and musical settings can be read as subtly communicating a Christian sense of hope.
In this study, I have sought to uncover a strong sense of unity in the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, not only by offering a particular understanding of the fourth song and its connection to the other three, but by seeing more clearly the hope, albeit it tentative, in the first three songs. The examination of the songs has shown a logical thread throughout the four songs: a coming to terms with the inevitability of death, an acceptance of the suffering of life, the hope for a better life after death, an image of how beautiful life after death will be, with an exhortation to love one another during this life. Through these four songs, Brahms not only documents the questions he has asked and the lessons he has learned, but speaks to several universal human concerns. He manages to successfully present his own interpretation of the text without straining its overt meaning. This song cycle, written in a time of deep sadness and contemplation, can be heard as an indication of Brahms’s late spirituality, characterized mainly by the three attributes that grace the end of the final song: faith, hope, and love.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Lucy Church received her Bachelor of Music degree in Piano Performance from Wheaton College (IL) in 2009. In the spring of 2011, she completed a Masters of Music in Historical Musicology at Florida State University and will begin the doctoral program there in the fall. After obtaining her PhD, she hopes to teach music history at the undergraduate level. Lucy’s interests include 19th and 20th century music, vocal repertoire – especially choral literature and art song – and sacred music.