

Rest and Respite in the Brahms German Requiem



After 54 storied years as an artistic director of choruses in Washington, D.C., Maestro Robert Shafer will retire following the City Choir of Washington's Brahms Requiem on June 26, 2022. Maestro Shafer finds the Brahms to be especially meaningful for its text in Movement VII: "That they rest from their labors, and that their works follow after them." Upon his retirement, Maestro Shafer will be Artistic Director Emeritus of the City Choir of Washington. He plans to continue making music in the D.C. area and to be an integral part of the City Choir family—in fact, incoming Artistic Director Erin Freeman has already commissioned a new piece by Shafer for City Choir's June 2023 concert.

Maestro Shafer recently wrote to the choir, "There are many great Requiems in the choral repertoire, and many are comforting at times but also contain terrifying depictions of death and judgment. The Brahms Requiem is completely different. It helps us consider death as a relevant and illuminating part of life itself. As the text says in Movement III: 'Lord, help me to understand that my life on earth must have an end, that I must depart.'"

Shafer is also drawn to the Brahms for its focus on warmth and comfort. He notes that the most repeated word in the Brahms Requiem is "getröset" (comfort). In Movement I: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall have comfort." And Movement V, with its beautiful soprano solo, assures the listener, "Yea, I will comfort you as one whom his own mother comforts." Shafer notes that Brahms used not only the text—which he himself chose from his childhood Luther bible—but also the orchestration to convey the feeling of warmth and comfort. The first movement, for example, takes out the violins entirely in favor of the warm tones and dark colors of divided violas and cellos, and double bass. Brahms uses winds judiciously, and his use of harps (relatively uncommon at the time) suggests the mundane succor of timely rain in Movement II and the heavenly solace of motherly love in Movement V.



In our performance of the Brahms German Requiem, the City Choir of Washington wishes comfort for those who mourn and blessings for the dead, particularly for those affected by the war in Ukraine.