Three Spires Singers and Orchestra
Brahms — Symphony No.4 & *Ein Deutsches Requiem*
Truro Cathedral
Saturday 22nd November 2025

This all-Brahms programme by the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra was demanding. The challenges presented by the Fourth Symphony and *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (German Requiem) rest as much in interpretation as in technical arduousness; and in both respects, conductor James Anderson-Besant's perspective and direction were almost always persuasive. Rarely did I, knowing both pieces well, have any sense that something should have been done differently.

Over the last 120 years or so, it has become commonplace to play Brahms' orchestral works with around 70 players or more — though this is a larger number than was used for most such concerts in Brahms' lifetime. A photograph of the famous Meiningen Orchestra in 1882, three years before it presented this symphony's premier under the composer's baton, features some 48 players — a smaller string section than became common in later years, and more or less exactly the size of the Three Spires Orchestra for this concert.

So what Three Spires did was the norm for Brahms; and compared with larger ensembles it produces a different balance between wind and strings — somewhat leaner, less lush, but also clearer. And that was especially apt for Truro Cathedral's resonant acoustic. You could hear detail that, in a wash of opulent string tone, might have become lost.

Each of Brahms' symphonies presents differing interpretative challenges; and perhaps the most demanding aspect of the fourth is its complexity of texture and structure. Rightly have a number of commentators drawn attention to its remarkable blend of intellectual rigour and emotional depth. The first movement's opening theme must not feel slow; and its extended repetitions of the same crotchet–minim rhythm are at their best if they feel like an endless sequence of caresses — which

was exactly how they sounded on this occasion, as if the opening bars were already part-way through a long phrase, beautifully coloured by the contrasting rhythms of the wind. I was not convinced by a slowing of momentum in the development section — but that's a personal reaction which raises one of the most contentious issues about Brahms performance, his well-documented views on tempo, of which more later.

The second movement, marked *Andante moderato* (a moderate walking speed), was beautifully paced. It was flexible, spaciously phrased — and it breathed. Aptly has the third movement been described (I forget by whom) as a "Dance of Brueghelian gaiety". (Think of the several paintings of village dances by both Brueghel the Elder and the Younger.) The playing was bracingly robust; and although the tempo felt just right for the composer's *Allegro giocoso* (fast and joyful) marking, it was never hard-driven (a frequent fault, I find, in many modern performances) because here too, the music breathed.

In so many ways, the last movement is unique among symphonic finales of the 19th century, most obviously in that, until its astonishing concluding minutes, it is a set of 30 variations on an eight-bar, triple-time theme adapted from the last movement of Bach's Cantata 150. Speed is crucial in achieving the intensity implied by the tempo marking: *Allegro energico e passionate* (Fast, energetic and passionate). All too often, it opens too slowly to achieve that intensity from the start; but on this occasion it felt just right —a huge arch of one-in-a-bar rhythm. And the larger patterns of the movement, with variations grouped into several long sequences akin (as several commentators have pointed out) to the proportions of sonata form, were impeccably shaped and contrasted. Thanks to that and to secure, well-defined playing, this was a rewarding and memorable performance.

The *German Requiem* is by far the most famous of Brahms' seven works for choir and full-size orchestra. The issues of tempo referred to earlier are especially potent in this piece, and crossed my mind on several occasions during this performance. Brahms was never a fan of the metronome, for of his published markings he said,

“Good friends have talked me into putting them there, for I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together.” Four years before his death in 1898, he removed all such markings from the published score of the *Requiem*. Indeed, although he indicated some very specific tempo markings throughout the score, recordings made over the last 100 years or demonstrate significant varieties of speed — varieties that have a deep impact on the character of the movements concerned.

Perhaps no movement can be as affected by such variable character as the famous second movement. It opens with words from the First Epistle of Peter (paraphrasing Isaiah and other earlier texts):

> Denn alles Fleisch ist wie Gras und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen wie des Grases Blumen. Das Gras ist verdorret und die Blume abgefallen.
> (All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls.)

Brahms’ tempo marking is *Langsam, marschmässig* (Slow, moderate march). His original metronome mark, later deleted, is one crotchet per second. So what kind of piece is this? Is it a slow, triple-time funeral march, as in a number of distinguished recordings? In that guise it can have menacing power. Only a tad faster and it can remain solemn but somehow less brooding. All this, plus other directions to strings and wind seem somehow to be more suggestive than prescriptive.

This performance of that movement was at the fast end of what these indications might be taken to imply. For that and other reasons, it felt less intense than it might have been, less intense than I would prefer. But it was lucid and had distinct character.

During much of the performance I pondered on the balance between choir and orchestra, for in many places the orchestra seemed louder than was ideal. Could it have been quieter? I’m not sure, for this score is amongst the most wind-rich of Brahms’ orchestral scores, with contrabassoon, three trombones and tuba added to the forces used in the symphony. The cathedral’s resonant acoustic tends to favour

wind; and there is always a tendency, when the choir is placed at the crossing between nave and transepts, for the choral sound to disappear into the tower above the crossing.

Throughout the concert, the choral singing was secure; and one of its impressive aspects was the control of dynamics, especially the handling of the composer's detailed instructions for crescendos and decrescendos. They were well-graded, with little or no tendency to suffer from burn-out. And the singers responded faithfully to James Anderson-Besant's frequently and aptly flexible tempos. I was especially struck by the expressive strength and subtlety of the famous fourth movement, *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen* (How lovely are your dwelling places), the only part of the *Requiem* that is often sung as a single choral piece in concerts and church services.

Another point on which I pondered arose because of the German language. It is a common characteristic of English-language choirs to be soft on consonants — after all, it is vowels that sustain vocal sound. But sometimes this can produce an under-emphasis on words, and in this performance of a German-language piece I sometimes wanted to hear more edgy vowels and consonants that were a bit more explosive. To the individual singer, such emphases might feel artificial; but done well in ensemble they can make even the most elaborate polyphony (of which there's plenty in this piece) sound like words made song.

However, overall this was a rewarding concert, with choral singing that was full of character and expressively well-shaped. It did justice to music that is one of the late 19th century's pinnacles of choral composition.

The two solo singers played an important part in that success. The young German bass-baritone Florian Störtz was impeccably secure and convincing in his subtly dramatic contribution to the long and highly contrasted third movement — singing that was beautifully shaped by a strongly rhetorical perspective on the text. It was speech made song.

But to me, the startling star of the evening was soprano Francesca Chiejina: startling both because she was a last-minute (less than 24 hours?) stand-in for Camilla Harris, who was taken ill, and because her singing of the solo part in the fifth movement was so extraordinary. Her opening was not an obvious entry, but an unfolding of a precious idea — *Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit: aber ich will euch wiedersehen* (You now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again.). It was so beautifully unforced; and the choir's background echoing of her text felt just right. This is a singer who listens to what's going on around her, and who responds flexibly, with effortless fluency, beautiful tone and subtle dynamic control. In the moments of its happening, helped along by some especially beautiful wind playing, it achieved something every musical performance should. It felt perfect.

Martin Adams

Martin Adams has lived in Camborne since 2016. Between 1979 and 2015 he worked in the Music Department of Trinity College Dublin as a lecturer and latterly as associate professor. In addition to his academic publications, he was for thirty years a frequent contributor of concert reviews to *The Irish Times*.