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Introduction

Throughout his life, Brahms was preoccupied with the question of how humanity could come to terms with the harshness of reality and humankind's ultimate fate – death. During the period when he conducted the Hamburger Frauenchor for several years from 1859, the number of works that he programmed concerning death is notable, including the Bach cantatas *Christ lag in Todesbanden* and *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* and Schumann's *Requiem für Mignon*.[1] Brahms set both sacred and secular texts related to death from his earliest published works, including his setting of 'Come Away, Death' from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* as the second of the *Vier Gesänge*, Op. 17 and *Begräbnisgesang*, Op. 13 for chorus and orchestra. An anonymous reviewer of Brahms's setting of this old German song on a text by Michael Weisse wrote presciently that his elegiac œuvre 'transfigure[s] earthly sorrow into eternal joy and hope'.[2]

Ein deutsches Requiem, Op. 45 (1868) marked the first occasion on which Brahms used sacred texts in an overtly secular fashion. In so doing, what he intended was to provide comfort to the largely secularized audience for whom he wrote. Concerning the premiere of the *Requiem*, Brahms famously posited that 'with regard to the text, I would happily omit "German" and simply put "Human"'.[3] Replacing the 'German' with 'human' not only elevated the work from the particular to the universal.[4] It also indicated the degree to which Brahms was concerned with humanity in this composition. Unlike other Requiem masses that pray for the souls of

[1] Dennis Shrock, *Choral Monuments: Studies of Eleven Choral Masterworks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 284.

[2] Anonymous review of *Begräbnisgesang* cited in Kurt Hofmann, 'Brahms the Hamburg Musician 1833–1862', in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3–30 (25).

[3] 'Was den Text betrifft, will ich bekennen, daß ich recht gern auch das "deutsch" fortließe und einfach den "Menschen" setzte.' Johannes Brahms to Karl Reinthaler, 9 October 1867, in *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Karl Reinthaler, Max Bruch, Hermann Deiters, Friedr. Heimsoth, Karl Reinecke, Ernst Rudorff, Bernhard und Luise Scholz*, ed. Wilhelm Altmann (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1907, repr. Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1974), 12.

[4] Daniel Beller-McKenna, 'How "deutsch" a Requiem? Absolute Music, Universality, and the Reception of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Op. 45', *19th-Century Music* 22/1 (1998): 3–19 (3).

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the dead, this work was to provide comfort and solace for those who mourn, those who continue to live with their loss. It would form a 'consolatory meditation on the common destiny of the living and the dead'.[5] The words of the prophet Isaiah evoked in the fifth movement of the Requiem, 'Ich will euch trösten' ('Thee will I comfort'), elegantly capture what Brahms sought to achieve with this and similar works, that is, to provide spiritual composition through the experience of which his audience would be comforted, elevated, and edified.[6]

In the 1870s and 1880s, Brahms wrote a number of choral works based on the secular texts of a group of humanist writers who were active in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century: Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). These compositions, *Schicksalslied*, Op. 54, *Nänie*, Op. 82, and *Gesang der Parzen*, Op. 89, are at the heart of a group of works that espouse a common aesthetic outlook and which I refer to as 'Brahms's Elegies'. Whereas many of Brahms's instrumental compositions might be described as elegiac, these three one-movement works for choir and orchestra can be distinguished from the larger group on account of the nature of their poetic texts. All three are concerned with the legends of classical antiquity as mediated through turn-of-the-century German Idealist poetry; all three address the gulf that is perceived to exist between the divine and the earthly realms; and all three confront the subject of loss, expressed in a distinctive poetic form in each of these three poems.[7] These works deal with the transience of life and the inevitability of death. Common to each of them is the promise that there is comfort and joy to be found for the living in a stoical acceptance of fate and of death. Such a message was consistent with beliefs about what it means to be truly human in a modern age, that is, to live without the surety of appeal to higher powers.

Also elegiac in its nature is the last work Brahms published in his lifetime, the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121 of 1896, a setting of texts from the Luther Bible on the subject of death. Brahms's choice of text consciously avoids any reference to God or to the notion of an afterlife. When viewed together, these choral and vocal works speak to the poetics of loss in

[5] Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (New York, NY: Schirmer, 1990), 196.
[6] This English translation is by Michael Musgrave, *Brahms: A German Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.
[7] Although the *Alto Rhapsody*, Op. 53 is also a one-movement work for choir and orchestra that sets a text by Goethe, it does not fit in this elegiac mode because it does not deal with death and the perceived disjunction between divinity and humankind and it does not deal with classical antiquity.

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German culture, addressing themes including nostalgia, loss, and mourning, a thread that runs through German intellectual thought from before these Hellenic humanists up to figures such as Martin Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno.[8] As is the case with *Ein deutsches Requiem*, these works provide a mechanism with which their audience can contemplate the human condition without relying on religious dogma. The sense of comfort and reconciliation that this aspect of Brahms's output continues to rouse in his audience is amongst the most widely commented upon facets of the reception of his works since the late nineteenth century.

Such consolatory readings of Brahms's Elegies are invariably bound up with reflection upon how each of these works ends. For, in each case, the sense of reconciliation that comes with the close of the composition is at odds with the bleak – at times despairing – poetry that precedes it. Scholars have attempted to account for such anomalous endings by exploring matters as diverse as the suitability of a particular text for musical setting, the incompatibility of such texts with Brahms's music, and tonal and formal ambiguities in Brahms's wider oeuvre.

Rarely, however, has anyone attempted to immerse themselves in the literature upon which Brahms based these works in their quest to account for these apparently anomalous endings. I neither refer here only to the poetic excerpts that Brahms set nor restrict my exploration to the literary works from which these excerpts are taken. Rather, I suggest that in order to fully appreciate the context in which these compositions were created, and to gain an insight into their rich poetic resonance, one must come to terms with the whole literary and philosophical movement that surrounds Brahms's Elegies and the aesthetic sensibility they espouse. This is bound up with the notion of *Bildung*, with its characteristic assimilation of philosophical thought, which applies equally to the individual human life and to the individual work of art.

Bildung, often rendered in English as 'formation through culture' is a self-motivated process based on the premise that understanding culture and history leads to a deeper and more profound understanding of the self.[9] The process of *Bildung* leads to well-considered judgements and actions through which one can arrive at truth, knowledge, and understanding. This

[8] A very useful source dealing with this aspect of German culture is found in Mary Cosgrove and Anna Richards, eds, *Sadness and Melancholy in German-Language Literature and Culture. Edinburgh German Yearbook* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011).

[9] For a detailed exploration of the concept, see Kristin Gjesdal, 'Bildung', in *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael N. Forster and Kristin Gjesdal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 695–719, on which the present discussion relies.

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critical and reflective notion has its roots in the Enlightenment, with its characteristic emphasis on the formation of the self. The Enlightenment ethos is evident in the emphasis on individual responsibility, a belief in democracy, and an appeal to reflection and independent thought. *Bildung* is a concept that has its roots in philosophy, although its tentacles reach into the humanities at large. It also has a bearing on politics, having been conceived of as an intense reflection on the French Revolution. It embraces the notion of recovering an ideal nature from which humanity has been alienated. The humanist ethos of *Bildung*, as Kristin Gjesdal points out, goes hand in hand with a process of secularization, which in turn involves a new sense of freedom: human nature is not given, but instead it forms itself in an ongoing process of cultivation.[10] In literary studies, as will be shown, *Bildung* is manifest in the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of cultivation, a genre whose finest examples include Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795–6), and Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1797–9).

The process of *Bildung* is beset by an essential homesickness or nostalgia that is concerned equally with the individual and with the collective. While it is a psychic process that relates back to the inner emotional life of the individual, it is also a quintessentially German phenomenon that remains intricately bound up with issues of German national identity. Following Kant, Schiller cast the education (*Erziehung*) required for self-formation as aesthetic, seeing the arts as central to the process of *Bildung*, which he considers to be bound up with a mediation between conceptual understanding and the imagination.[11] In this Schillerian sense, which is pivotal for the arguments in the present book, the aesthetic ideal of *Bildung* is intricately linked to the basic three-stage scheme of what Constantin Behler calls aesthetic humanism, a phenomenon that looks back to an earlier ideal unity of human nature and espouses its recovery as the goal of cultivation, morality, and history. This process is further described by Behler as 'nostalgic teleology' because of the manner in which it looks simultaneously to what has been lost in the past and to its future recovery.[12]

This intrinsically temporal concept therefore postulates a metaphor for renewal and a theme of reawakening. Assimilating philosophical thought with cultural, moral, and pedagogical imperatives, *Bildung* has been deeply influential since the turn of the nineteenth century. It is exemplified in the poetry and dramatic works of Goethe (particularly his short epic poem

[10] Gjesdal, 'Bildung', 697. [11] Gjesdal, 'Bildung', 707.
[12] Constantin Behler, *Nostalgic Teleology: Friedrich Schiller and the Schemata of Aesthetic Humanism* (Bern and New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1995).

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Hermann und Dorothea and the novels *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister*); in Hölderlin's lyrics, hymns, odes, elegies, and his novel *Hyperion*; and in the philosophical writings of Hegel, particularly his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. These writings bespeak a peaceful (as opposed to revolutionary) reform in the wake of the French Revolution. They laud the originality and naturalness of this living heritage as ideal qualities for the foundation of humane political and historical action. By way of a heightened sense of historical consciousness, these writers draw attention to the relationship between antiquity and modernity and the possibility of a philosophical vision that mediates both. They enhance cultural understanding of ancient literature and provide a theoretical understanding of their own poetic output by way of envisioning a more beautiful sense of the future. The ideal of humanity and of a society that stems from this aesthetic humanism has continued to shape intellectual and literary thinking from the late eighteenth century to the present. It informs the philosophy and critical theory of a host of figures from Nietzsche to Adorno, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Marcuse to such a degree that René Wellek would refer to Schiller's Neoplatonic aesthetics in 1955 as 'the fountainhead of all later German critical theory'.[13]

There is much to be gained by viewing Brahms's Elegies as a group and exploring their shared aesthetic sensibility in the context of this broader cultural phenomenon. The single-movement choral works *Schicksalslied*, *Nänie*, and *Gesang der Parzen* have been thought of as Brahms's practice pieces on the path to the completion of the First and Second Symphonies.[14] Whether or not we can meaningfully understand them as such, they have far more to offer. As a distinctive genre, they allow us to explore the relationship between Brahms's music and the German intellectual tradition beyond the intimate confines of the Lied and to consider how these large-scale works for choir and orchestra confront weighty philosophical and existential issues.

Brahms was an avid reader, deeply engaged with the literature of his own time and that of the past. This is evident from the time of his youth in the notebooks now housed at the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, *Des jungen Kreislers Schatzkästlein*, in which he recorded excerpts of poetry that were particularly dear to him.[15] The range and richness of Brahms's library

[13] René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1960. Vol.* I*, The Later Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), 232.

[14] See, for instance, Walter Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 32–37.

[15] Johannes Brahms, *The Brahms Notebooks: The Little Treasure Chest of the Young Kreisler*, trans. Agnes Eisenberger (New York, NY: Pendragon Press, 2003).

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further testifies to this.[16] His library also reveals an enduring interest in philosophical matters. Along with the volumes of Herder, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche that he read and annotated were anthologies of philosophy such as Friederike Kempner's, the first of which (1883) contains excerpts of Kant, Locke, Cartesius, Friedrich the Great, Marcus Aurelius, and Rousseau, and the second (1886) includes passages from Plato, Leibniz, Cicero, and Saint-Pierre.[17] Brahms was deeply preoccupied with questions regarding the human condition, fate, and mortality. As Hanns Christian Stekel proposes, he sought out the same difficult questions on death and on the gulf between the divine and the human in his Biblical settings as he did in his secular choral orchestral works in order to 'legitimize' them.[18]

Literary figures often provide a much more complex and nuanced philosophy of the human condition than many of the ideologies and philosophies that dominated the nineteenth century. For instance, in the compositions explored in the first three chapters of this book, we find the philosophical ideologies of Kant and Hegel filtered through the writings of Hölderlin, Goethe, and Schiller. Brahms's choice of texts from the Bible also reflect a philosophical mindset. The texts he chose for the first two of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, for instance, have frequently been associated with the writings of Schopenhauer.[19] As I argue in Chapter 4, his setting of the text in the last song may well be related to his reading of Nietzsche in the last years of his life. In Brahms's unique treatment of form in all of these pieces, we see the composer grappling with the weight of these philosophical issues in all of the literature he set, and responding to it through musical means.

Upon his death, Brahms bequeathed his personal library to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (with whom he had a long-standing and close relationship from the time he was the Society's Artistic Director from 1872 to 1875) and to a private collection in Hamburg, now housed at the Brahms-Institut, Lübeck. In consulting the books in Brahms's library, one sees that he heavily annotated them, leaving his characteristic *Kratzspuren* (the term Kurt Hofmann has given to the scratches Brahms made with his

[16] See Kurt Hofmann, *Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms* (Hamburg: Wagner, 1974).

[17] Friederike Kempner, *Auszüge aus den berühmtesten Philosophen von Plato bis auf unsere Zeit in beliebiger Zeit und Reihenfolge* (Berlin: K. Siegismund, 1883–6).

[18] Hanns Christian Stekel, *Sehnsucht und Distanz: Theologische Aspekte in den wortgebundenen religiösen Kompositionen von Johannes Brahms* (Frankfurt am Main, et al.: Peter Lang, 1997), 67.

[19] See Daniel Beller-McKenna, 'Brahms on Schopenhauer: The *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121, and Late Nineteenth-Century Pessimism', in *Brahms Studies*, ed. David Brodbeck (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), I, 170–90.

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fingernails when he found a passage of particular interest),[20] and markings and marginalia. While being cautious of the risk of reading too much into such markings, there is much to be learnt from them if they are judiciously considered together with documentary evidence from Brahms's letters, the recollections and memoirs of those who knew him, and the hermeneutic analysis of the compositions related to this literature. The first four chapters of this book undertake this analytical task.

The conclusion of *Schicksalslied*, as we shall see in Chapter 1, has confounded scholars for two reasons: Brahms's setting of Hölderlin's ostensibly despairing poem ends with an orchestral section that evokes comfort and reconciliation, and the postlude transposes the material of the introduction down to C major, bringing the piece to a close in a key other than its E♭ major opening. Peter Petersen argues that this represents 'a rare instance of a composer not merely placing an arbitrary interpretation on words but explicitly contradicting a poet's statement'.[21] John Daverio and Christopher Reynolds hold similar views, seeing Hölderlin's poem as if divorced from the novel *Hyperion*.[22] Although the poem marks the chronological endpoint of the novella, it is intricately bound up with levels of time, and it serves to engender further events in the novel, a process that is apposite to M. H. Abrams's notion of 'the ascending circle, or spiral'.[23] The recollection of music in an altered key in Brahms's postlude is also apposite to Abrams's notion. Drawing variously on musical and hermeneutic analysis, on evidence from Brahms's personal library, and on newly discovered correspondence from Hermann Levi, I argue that Brahms's 'eccentric path' – like Hölderlin's – leads us away from the original unity of the work in order to restore it in a heightened manner. The postlude prompts reflection and realization on the part of Brahms's listener akin to that of Hölderlin's reader.

Brahms returned, four years after the premiere of Symphony No. 2 in 1877, to the writings of the Weimar Classicists in his settings of *Nänie* (1881) and *Gesang der Parzen* (1882). This was unfinished business for the composer, and our grasp of the richness of his creative process is severely

[20] Hofmann, *Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms*.
[21] Peter Petersen, 'Werke für Chor und Orchester', in *Johannes Brahms: Leben und Werke*, ed. Christiane Jacobsen (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1983).
[22] John Daverio, 'The "Wechsel der Töne" in Brahms's *Schicksalslied*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46/1 (Spring 1993): 84–113; Christopher Reynolds, 'Brahms Rhapsodizing: The *Alto Rhapsody* and its Expressive Double', *Journal of Musicology* 29/2 (Spring 2012): 191–238.
[23] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, NY and London: Norton, 1971).

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diminished if we ignore the New Humanist aesthetic that pervades each of these works and the attendant poetic resonance that traverses decades of Brahms's output.

In Chapter 2, *Nänie* is explored in relation to Schiller's aesthetic theory of mourning, while Schiller's poem is considered in relation to matters of form in Brahms's setting. Situating *Nänie* in relation to the Schillerian 'idyll' opens up new perspectives on the intertextual nature of this composition and its frame of allusive reference. It is shown that the allusions in both the poem and the composition are bound up with particular moments in time. Schiller's literary allusions extend to Homer, just as Brahms's musical allusions go beyond self-allusion and extend to Beethoven and Schumann. This composition concerns not only the literary and the musical realms, however, but also the visual realm, a testament to the vital role that visual art played in Brahms's intellectual world as he composed his elegiac choral works in the 1870s and 1880s. In *Nänie*, this artistic element is directly related to the death of the artist Anselm Feuerbach (1829–1880). The visual, the literary, and the musical are intricately interwoven in Brahms's composition, being drawn together by their common German Idealism. *Nänie* is connected to the group of artists known as the *Deutsch-Römer* (German Romans, of whom Feuerbach was a key member), and they, in turn, are related to the new humanism of Schiller, Goethe, and Hölderlin. Brahms brings all three art forms together in *Nänie* in what I argue, with recourse to the theories of Reinhold Brinkmann, is a musical manifestation of a Schillerian 'idyll'. In setting Schiller's elegiac poem to music, Brahms created a lasting connection between composer, artist, and poet, all of whom, to varying degrees, may be understood as heirs to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's (1717–1768) neoclassicism in the literary, visual, and musical realms. Schiller, Feuerbach, and Brahms are further united around their varying relationships to German Idealism, with their focus being predominantly fixed on the reflective conception of ideas (*Begriffe*) rather than perception (*Anschauung*).

Attitudes toward German Idealism changed substantially throughout the nineteenth century. The power of its aesthetic force at the beginning of the century was matched only by the degree to which it then completely disappeared as an aesthetic category at the century's end. After the horrors of the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune (1870–1), Idealism seemed like an implausible utopian project. Within the space of a year, in his elegiac choral output, Brahms could represent both the early and the late stages of this literary concept. Whereas *Nänie* is a paean to musical beauty that espouses the optimistic Idealism of the earlier part of the

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century, when Brahms turned to composing *Gesang der Parzen* in 1882, his position on musical beauty and his approach to tonality had altered considerably. At this point, Brahms was no longer attempting to seek Schillerian harmony in an ever less harmonious world, but was instead exploring the nature of dissonance, both tonal and existential.

In correspondence with his friend Theodor Billroth in 1882, Brahms explained that he wished to conceal any association with Goethe's *Iphigenie* on the title page of his composition *Gesang der Parzen*, Op. 89. Posterity has been slow to take the composer at his word on this matter, instead associating Op. 89 with Goethe's (and Euripides's) *Iphigenie* setting(s). Scholarship has also discounted the connection Brahms established between the *Parzenlied* and Goethe's Juno Ludovisi, disregarding the fact that the Head of Juno once belonged to a statue just as the poem Brahms set once belonged to Goethe's drama.

Aesthetic contemplation of the *Parzenlied* in and of itself when divorced from Goethe's play reveals this one-movement choral work to recount the tale of the fall of Tantalus in classical mythology, which is analogous to the notion of original sin in the Christian realm. This tale of divine justice and eternal punishment is retold in many of the books in Brahms's library, including Homer, Ovid, Aeschylus, and Sophocles. Due to Brahms's manipulation of formal functions and his vexing of cadential structures, this work, much like Tantalus, steadfastly refuses to allow the listener to 'touch' that which seems to be within their reach, from the sense of consolation the major modality offers in the fifth stanza to the ostensible tonality of the entire piece (D minor). *Gesang der Parzen*, whose 'remarkable harmonies already take it far away from tonality', as Anton Webern insisted, refrains from offering resolution.[24] Instead, this most desolate piece seems to offer only emptiness. Brahms persistently associated *Parzenlied* with the Book of Job, and the juxtaposition of Biblical and mythical tales of divine punishment in relation to this secular choral work provides a broad hermeneutic context for its interpretation. Whereas numerous commentators have understood Feuerbach's depictions of *Iphigenia* to form an artistic analogy to Brahms's *Gesang der Parzen*, owing to their common source material in Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*,[25] I propose that the beauty, savagery, and indifference with which

[24] Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black (Bryn Mawr, PA: Universal Edition, 1975), 46.

[25] The dissonance and despondency that characterize *Gesang der Parzen* is difficult to perceive in these Feuerbach paintings. Instead, Feuerbach's *Iphigenia* settings have an affinity with the ennoblement of mourning found in Brahms's *Nänie*.

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Brahms's composition is marked instead finds a kinship with the art of the Italian Renaissance, with which Brahms was deeply preoccupied at the time of writing this piece.

From a formal perspective, these choral works do not sit comfortably in sonata form.[26] As I argue in the chapters that follow, attempts to view these pieces within the closed forms of instrumental music hinder hermeneutic interpretation and limit our understanding of Brahms's subtle sense of form in these pieces. Each composition, however, can be understood to work against the formal processes of sonata form. The fact that a piece is not in sonata form, and does not rigidly follow its procedures, does not mean that we cannot profitably consider it in relation to sonata theory and glean important insights into how its form operates. The methodologies of sonata theory developed by James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy in recent years have explored how form and hermeneutics interact, and how form relates to narrative, drama, and expression.[27] The methodology put forward by Hepokoski, in particular, has allowed insights into formal processes in these single-movement Brahms elegies that might otherwise have remained obscure. These methodologies further enhance our understanding of how poetry and music interact in Brahms's output. These analytical findings, in turn, open up a wider debate on the subject of Brahms's relationship to literature, to philosophy, and to the German intellectual tradition more broadly.

The present book, therefore, is as concerned with Brahms's music as it is with the intellectual tradition upon which the composer drew, for it recognizes how deeply his fate-related compositions are indebted to this cultural heritage and, moreover, how much later strands of this same cultural heritage in the twentieth century are indebted to Brahms. It is the first study to investigate Brahms's place within the rich matrix of aesthetics and modernity that extends from German Idealist thinkers to the Frankfurt School.

Two important figures who appear along that continuum are Nietzsche and Schopenhauer with whom, I suggest in Chapter 4, Brahms engages in the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121. In this work, the composer returned in the winter of his life to an intense contemplation of the Luther Bible, which

[26] Despite sonata form not being a vocal norm, various authors to whom we turn below consider Brahms's choral pieces through the lens of sonata form, including Margaret Notley and Timothy Jackson.

[27] James Hepokoski, 'Beyond the Sonata Principle', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55/1 (2002): 91–154; Hepokoski, 'Back and Forth from *Egmont*: Beethoven, Mozart, and the Non-Resolving Recapitulation', *19th-Century Music* 25/2–3 (2002): 127–54.

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