



Song of Destiny (Schicksalslied)

Johannes Brahms

Born: 7 May 1833 Hamburg

Died 3 April 1897 Vienna

Brahms was a pessimist by nature, and perhaps this accounted for his choice of Friedrich Hölderlin's uncompromising verses, from his novel *Hyperion*, as the basis of the *Schicksalslied* (*Song of Destiny*) op. 54. He composed the work in 1871, and it was first performed later that year in Karlsruhe on 18 October, conducted by Hermann Levi. Its subject is the contrast between the gods on high and mankind beneath. This contrast, moreover, is graphically and uncompromisingly drawn. Whereas the gods 'wander in the light, heavenly zephyrs playing upon them', man's fate is cruelly depicted: 'suffering humanity, like water dashed from crag to crag, year after long year, into the unknown.'

This dark text inspired from Brahms some of his most powerful music. The orchestral introduction, described in the score as "slow and longing", features softly harmonised muted violins, but the persistent throbbing of the timpani prevents any radiance of tone. The evocation of mankind's struggles against fate proves to be particularly powerful, with angular cross-rhythms and heavy orchestration, including *fortissimo* trumpets and trombones. When the music of the opening returns, in order to form a postlude, it achieves a new serenity. Whether this is symbolic of hope, however, must remain an enigma. The answer, probably, is that it is not; rather it could refer to the gods' lingering disregard for the troubles of man. Be that as it may, this remains one of Brahms' least known but most important compositions.

Terry Barfoot