

2026-03-30 Brahms, Ein deutsches Requiem, No. 7: Selig sind

We conclude Johannes Brahms's *German Requiem* by listening to its seventh and final movement. This is the only movement based on a single verse, one from the Book of Revelation. Now many dates have been proposed for the book of Revelation, but I am persuaded by the arguments placing it during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (c. 95 CE), this was a time when people were increasingly pressured to participate in the imperial cult. If you refused to worship the emperor, you could pay a hefty fine, or face exile and financial disaster, or even be publicly tortured and put to death, and your family lose all your property.

So I understand this wonderful verse as addressing this specific situation in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The 14<sup>th</sup> chapter briefly develops a series of topics: First, The Lamb (a metaphor for Christ) and the 144,000 faithful (a beautifully symbolic number, 12K x 12 K). Then the writer foretells of the future fall of Babylon, which would have been understood as code for Rome and its Empire. Then there is the warning against worshiping the beast, in this context possibly meaning worshiping the emperor, and that is followed by a prediction of a coming Judgment, during which the evil doers will be punished. Verse 12 concludes this section of chapter 14: "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints." This then brings the author of Revelation to today's verse: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth. Yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, and their works do follow them."

I understand these statements as words of encouragement to those facing possible martyrdom for their faith in the Roman Empire. 'Resting from their labours' might signify that death concludes their labouring while testifying and being tortured. And the phrase 'their works do follow them' in this context suggests to me that the testimonies they gave to their faith, both verbal and through endurance and death, those testimonies lived on. In fact, we know that the witnessing of early Christians—even to the point of death—so impressed some people that the numbers of Christians grew remarkably during times of persecution.

However, I doubt that Brahms had the late-first-century context in mind when selecting this verse. To Brahms, and to his audience, this verse would have been understood in the context of their 19<sup>th</sup>-century lives. To them, and to our audiences today, these words give assurance that all will be well when believers die after living faithful lives. Furthermore, now they can finally rest from all

their labours, and whatever good works they might have done will continue to live on, and influence others.

Some think of this verse as a Beatitude within the book of Revelation. And why not. After all, Brahms began this German Requiem with a Beatitude from Matthew (blessed are they that mourn), so I like to think of this concluding movement as being the setting of yet another Beatitude (blessed are they which die in the Lord).

This Requiem's first movement began quietly and its final movement will conclude quietly, allowing peace to descend on us all. After all, that seems to be the composer's primary objective, giving himself—and us—a profound sense of inner peace when confronted by death.

2026-03-30 Meditation for Monday in Holy Week is now available  
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***Ein deutsches Requiem: Selig sind***, Op. 45, No. 7 (1866)

Lyrics: Revelation 14:13 (translation by Martin Luther)

Music: Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Artists: Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Radio Choir, Daniel Harding (dir.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRU7Nwp2FoM&list=PL9yl-ZQyD9w8r4v8hUBjTC-gEdhu9hZWn&index=7>

**No. 7 *Selig sind die Toten*** [Choir]

[Sung first in unison by sopranos, then in unison by basses, then in four parts]

*Selig sind die Toten,*

Blessed are the dead

*die in dem Herrn sterben, von nun an.*

Which die in the Lord from henceforth.

[Brief orchestral interlude]

*Ja, der Geist spricht,*

Yes, says the Spirit,

*daß sie ruhen von ihrer Arbeit;*

That they may rest from their labours

*denn ihre Werke folgen ihnen nach.*

And their works do follow them. [Revelation 14:13]

[Tenors soar when reintroducing the opening theme.]

*Selig sind die Toten,*

Blessed are the dead

*die in dem Herrn sterben, von nun an.*

Which die in the Lord from henceforth.

[Closing words to our theme song:]

*O! dass diess jeder Sünder wüsste,*

O! that every sinner would know this,

*Sein Herz wohl bald dich lieben müsste.*

His heart must soon surely love You.

Evan

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