

Christopher Hossfeld
Repertory Chorus Program Notes
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Fünf Gesänge, op. 104 (1888)

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Nachtwache I
Nachtwache II
Letztes Glück
Verlorene Jugend
Im Herbst

The five choral miniatures that comprise Brahms' *Fünf Gesänge* were composed in the years 1886 to 1888. They come near the end of a busy decade for Brahms, filled with orchestral tours and the composition of some of his greatest works, namely the second piano concerto, the double concerto for violin and 'cello, the third and fourth symphonies, many chamber pieces, and countless lieder. The choral songs of opus 104 reflect the thoughts of a man who has reached the pinnacle of his career and is facing the final years of his life: fond memories of love, missed opportunities, unfulfilled desires, mourning of lost youth, and gradual acceptance of inevitable death.

The poets for the cycle were familiar territory for Brahms: he had set poetry by all of them before in settings for choral and solo voices, especially the German translations of Bohemian folk poetry by Josef Wenzig. Friedrich Rückert was a powerhouse of Germanic lieder: his poetry was the inspiration for over two thousand settings by eight hundred composers, including Brahms, Schumann, Schubert, Mahler, and Strauss. Brahms was close friends with Klaus Groth and Max Kalbeck, who would later complete the first comprehensive biography of Brahms in the years 1904-1914.

The technique of canonic imitation is a common thread in Brahms' choral music, and the five songs of opus 104 are no exception. Here he uses similar and contrasting canonic techniques to tie together a cycle which is already harmonically close-knit. The stark imitation at the beginning of the cycle slowly gives way to the homophonic texture of the final song.

In the first song, "Nachtwache I", Brahms sets the men and women against each other, trading off material from bar to bar. The soprano and tenor are in canon at the seventh at the opening, giving way to a rising line as each part climbs above the other. The imitation in "Nachtwache II" is interwoven into the choral texture, sometimes involving all of the vocal parts, as in the phrase: "*Hörst du, zagendes Herz, die flüstern den Stimmen der Engel?*" By the third song the men and women are almost on top of each other, their imitation offset by only one beat (recalling the setting of "*seufzend*" in the first song). This close imitation naturally gives way to a more melodically driven homophonic texture that begins to dominate the cycle. In the fourth song, these imitative and homophonic textures are set against each other in contrasting sections in D minor and D major. The canon here is lonelier: the leading canonic voice (first alto, then baritone) is alone, with the rest of the choir accompanying the answering soprano. With the final song, "Im Herbst", the transition is complete; the agitation of the imitation in earlier songs is gone, replaced by the inward resolve of this homophonic setting.