In our allegedly ‘historically-informed’ times, it has become unfashionable to laud Herbert von Karajan’s work in Classical repertoire. So much the worse for fashion. From Mozart’s divertimenti to Haydn’s oratorios, much of his finest work is to be found here. Karajan’s recordings of *The Creation* – especially that made with the Berlin Philharmonic, but also, more for connoisseurs, that with the Vienna Philharmonic – have long been esteemed by all but the most dogmatic authenticists. His account of *The Seasons*, however, like the work itself, has tended to be obscured by the shadow of its admittedly sublime predecessor. Berlin Philharmonic outings had not been frequent; Karajan’s 1972 performances, after which this recording was made, were his first and last, though he had also conducted the work in Aachen, in 1938, his chorus master the legendary Wilhelm Pitz, later of both Bayreuth and the Philharmonia Chorus. Indeed, since a 1944 cathedral performance conducted by Rudolf Lamy, the Berlin orchestra had given the work only once, under Fritz Weisse (1966); subsequent performances have taken place but once a decade: Hans Hilsdorf (1987), Wolfgang Sawallisch (1998), and Sir Simon Rattle (2003).

Karajan’s large-scale approach stands far truer to Haydn’s intentions and inspiration, born of giant Handel commemorations in London, than what we tend to hear today. The ferocity of the brass in the opening to ‘Spring’ might come as a surprise; it makes good pictorial as well as proto-Beethovenian sense. Winter harshness must be banished, before spring might be welcomed: the beguiling Berlin oboe, clarinet, bassoon soloists preparing the way for the ravishing tones of Gundula Janowitz. The picturesque fares well throughout, Karajan resisting the temptation, all-too-frequent for many conductors in this music, to underline it, whilst imparting not only the desired grand scale but also, more importantly, harmonic understanding and drive that can well be described as symphonic, the oratorio rightly understood in the context of the ‘London’ Symphonies and the late masses. Werner Hollweg and Walter Berry, the other soloists, make up a typical Karajan solo consort, well supported by the Deutsche Oper chorus. ‘Supported’, though, is hardly the right word: these singers are participants, not least in the final number’s joyous, yet hardly portentous, Resurrection of the dead. Karajan, his chorus, the Berlin wind players show themselves alert to the resonances with *Die Zauberflöte* when the holy mount crowned by a canopy appears, peace and tranquility enthroned. Haydn’s use, echoing Handel’s *Israel in Egypt*, of a double chorus, for what appears to be the first time in his œuvre and is unquestionably the last, offers exultance in performance too. One can only regret that Karajan did not perform more of Haydn’s choral music; of the masses, he seems only to have conducted the *Nelson*, and that in 1959, for Vienna’s commemoration of the composer’s death 150 years earlier.

The other two works in this collection received multiple Karajan recordings and performances. Karajan gave Beethoven’s *Missa solemnis* throughout his life, his first performances again in Aachen and again with Pitz, in 1937, his final thoughts delivered at the 1986 Salzburg Festival. There is a true sense of majesty to the present recording, in many ways quite different from Karajan’s earlier EMI recording, in which he had approached the throne of the Almighty – and Beethoven – almost as supplicant, conscious of the gulf separating God – or composer – and man. Here, Karajan apparently speaks in something approaching the first person. The opening of the ‘Credo’ sounds hewn not of the aural granite we often, quite rightly, hear invoked for Klemperer, but of marble. ‘Marmoreal’ is often employed, quite mysteriously, as a reproach; here Karajan puts his fabled and increasing fondness for orchestral beauty to good dramatic use. What detractors might call ‘gloss’ offers its own mystical self-justification, consonant both with plausible reading of the work and of Beethoven’s conceivable ‘intentions’. There is quasi-operatic drama too: the soloists’ stabbing cries of ‘Crucifixus’, and, punctuating Thomas Brandis’s sweet-toned ‘Benedictus’ violin solo, imploring solo and choral calls of ‘In nomine Domini’. Perhaps Karajan’s and his orchestra’s experience in Italian opera plays a part too. Yet the notorious cries of war, vocal and orchestral, in the ‘Agnus Dei’ are anything but melodramatic; that brutality which occasionally, for some, disfigures Karajan’s orchestral Beethoven here chills as it must. And ultimately, if Karajan is not necessarily the first choice of many as exemplar of humility, the listener may nevertheless well find himself humbled through experience of often-exquisite majesty: the beauty of holiness?

This recording of Brahms’s *Ein deutsches Requiem* stands in a still-longer tradition. Karajan’s final performance would be in Salzburg, in 1988, just a year before his death; for his first account, we once again return to Aachen and Pitz, fifty-two years earlier. Karajan conducted the work there four times before the outbreak of war, after which he would return to it in Vienna, in preparation for his first recording, also on EMI, to be heard elsewhere in this series. Here, as earlier, the recording is definitely of its time – which is not intended in any sense as an adverse criticism. Performance and recording alike announce a plusher sound than in the first recording. As with Haydn, we hear Brahms in the light and shadow of his symphonies – and Karajan’s conception of them – but there is thoroughly musical drama, triumph and consolation, in both. There is no need for histrionics in ‘Denn alles Fleisch’. Cumulative power speaks for itself: well-rehearsed, yes, for there can never be any doubting Karajan’s consummate professionalism, but not manicured. Solos are sung by a radiant Anna Tomowa-Sintow, who would be Karajan’s new Marschallin, thereby following in the footsteps of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf in both Brahms and Strauss, and with the equally rounded tones of José van Dam. This recording then, maintains tradition in the form of the Wiener Singverein and, of course, the Berlin Philharmonic, yet also looks to the future, even to the end: two movements from a work he cherished would be performed at the Vienna Philharmonic’s Karajan Salzburg memorial concert on 30 July 1989.