

“Verschleierte Symphonien—Unveiling the Symphonic in the Piano Sonatas of Johannes Brahms.”

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Abstract/ Abrégé

At twenty years old, Johannes Brahms met Robert and Clara Schumann for the first time in 1853. Brahms' piano sonatas came to be known as "Veiled Symphonies" or "Verschleierte Symphonien" when soon after their introduction, Robert Schumann published an article lauding Brahms' talent. This article was titled "Neue Bahnen," and had lasting implications on Brahms' career. Schumann's grand interpretation of Brahms' first works created a paradox, as they would forever be associated with two different mediums of composition. While the quality that first caused Schumann to assess these works as "symphonic" seems apparent to contemporary listeners, an in-depth study of the deeper roots of this connection has not yet been attempted. This study will explore these works using the "Neue Bahnen" article as a point of departure to develop a symphonic interpretation applicable to performance.

The current study will be carried out in five parts. First, it will discuss the historic implications of the "Neue Bahnen" article and its effect on Brahms' career. Second, it will turn to Brahms' orchestral compositions and orchestration to distinguish his orchestral style. Third, an exploration of Brahms' orchestral arrangements will provide support to the perceived orchestral textures of the piano sonatas. Fourth, monumentality will be explained as an historical concept and in relation to the "symphonic style"; then the idea of monumentality will be used as evidence of orchestra-oriented thinking in the piano sonatas. Fifth, historical considerations, orchestral style, arrangements, and monumentality will be brought together to provide an assessment of how all of these elements can effect a symphonic interpretation of the piano sonatas. With the assistance of my experience performing both the solos sonatas and orchestral arrangements I will identify five elements of interpretation: resonance, note lengths, balance, rubato and pedaling. These will be drawn on to demonstrate realistically applicable suggestions for enhancing performance.

C'est en 1853, âgé tout juste de 20 ans, que Johannes Brahms fait la connaissance Robert et Clara Schumann. Peu après cette rencontre, Robert Schumann publie un article intitulé «Neue Bahnen », faisant les éloges de Brahms. Cet article aura un impact sur la carrière de Brahms, dont les sonates seront désormais appelées « Symphonies voilées », ou « Verschleierte Symphonien ». L'interprétation grandiose des premières œuvres de Brahms par Schumann a créé un paradoxe, étant à tout jamais associé à deux avenues de composition différentes : sonate et symphonie. D'un point de vue contemporain, il est évident d'entendre ce qui a pu pousser Schumann à qualifier de « symphonique » les œuvres de Brahms. Il est donc surprenant qu'aucune étude approfondie des racines de cette connexion n'ait été envisagée auparavant. C'est pour cette raison que mon étude propose une exploration des sonates de Brahms utilisant l'article « Neue Bahnen » comme point de départ afin d'en développer une interprétation symphonique.

L'étude se divise en cinq parties. Premièrement, il y a une discussion des implications historiques de l'article « Neue Bahnen », ainsi que de ses effets sur la carrière de Brahms. Deuxièmement, une analyse des compositions orchestrales ainsi que l'orchestration telle qu'utilisée par Brahms nous permettent de distinguer son propre style orchestral. Troisièmement, une exploration des arrangements pour orchestre de Brahms établit un support concret pour les textures orchestrales perçues dans ses sonates pour piano. Ensuite, l'idée de « monumentalité » sera expliquée en tant que concept historique et en relation avec le « style symphonique » ; puis, la même idée sera utilisée afin de démontrer la présence d'une pensée orchestrale dans l'écriture des sonates pour piano de Brahms. Finalement, c'est en rassemblant les considérations historiques, le style orchestral, les arrangements et la monumentalité que l'établissement d'une interprétation symphonique des sonates pour piano sera établi. En me basant sur mon expérience d'interprète des sonates solo ainsi que des arrangements d'orchestre, je discuterai cinq éléments d'interprétation : résonance, longueur de notes, balance, rubato et jeux de pédales. Enfin, je suggérerai des techniques concrètes pour améliorer l'interprétation des œuvres pour piano de Brahms.

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I. Introduction

The year 1853 marked an important turning point in Johannes Brahms' career. Not only did he complete many of his landmark early compositions this year, he also met several of the influential musicians who would have a lasting effect on his career. For example, having toured as the accompanist to Hungarian violinist Eduard Remenyi, he was subsequently introduced to Joseph Joachim through their collaboration. This introduction to Joachim sparked a lifelong personal and musical friendship. In fact, Brahms' talents impressed Joachim so much that he wrote a letter of introduction and sent Brahms to meet Robert and Clara Schumann. As a guest in the Schumanns' home, he performed his very first compositions for piano—the Piano Sonatas Op. 1 and 2, and Scherzo Op. 4—among other works. Following this experience, Brahms wrote to Joachim about the inspirational effect meeting the Schumanns had on him:

“Their praise has made me so happy and resolute that I can't wait for the time when I can finally quietly turn to working and creating. Out of pure joy over Schumann's approval, I promised them, in fact, to stay here until you come and take me with you to Hanover.”¹

Brahms was not the only one inspired by this encounter. Robert Schumann felt compelled to write an article publicly lauding the young composer's compositions, and declaring his potential for greatness. This article was titled “Neue Bahnen” and it was published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*² on October 28, 1853.

In the “Neue Bahnen” article Schumann characterized Brahms' piano sonatas as “Verschleierte Symphonien.” This description created high expectations for Brahms' next works and much speculation about the identity of his solo piano sonatas in the years to

¹ Avins, *Brahms Life and Letters*, 21.

² For full text, see Appendix A (Schumann, *Schumann on Music*, 199-200.)

come. In this article, he also linked Brahms' performance style with the expression of these works by describing his piano playing as "making of the piano an orchestra of lamenting and rejoicing voices."³ Schumann elevated Brahms to the status of a deity, even going so far as to name twelve other composers as his apostles.⁴ He predicted that Brahms would soon compose a symphony combining the forces of chorus and orchestra, the likes of which had not been seen since Beethoven. The "Neue Bahnen" article planted the seed that has made Brahms' orchestral and piano works historically linked together. Although the piano sonatas came well before the symphonies, it is clear through these compositions that the desire to compose a symphony was strong during his early compositional period.

This article had a resounding effect on Brahms' career and took him from obscurity into the public eye. Schumann's glorification of Brahms, even having gone so far as to compare him to Beethoven in the most prominent musical journal of the day, undoubtedly created for him what has been called in literature an "anxiety of influence."⁵ At the time, Beethoven epitomized the highest standard for composers and Schumann's public association of the two composers amplified the anxiety of Beethoven's influence on Brahms.⁶ As the critic Eduard Hanslick noted in his 1876 review of Brahms' early

³ Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony*. 4.

⁴ These composers were Joseph Joachim, Ernst Naumann, Ludwig Norman, Woldemar Bargiel, Theodor Kirchner, Julius Schäffer, Albert Dietrich, C.F. Mangold, Robert Franz, and St.Heller.

⁵ "Anxiety of influence" is a term in poetry, coined by Harold Bloom, which is used to describe the internalized influence that great historical art has on the present by creating an anxiety that the achievements of others have left no room for current self-expression. Subsequently, this term has also been applied to music and visual art to describe similar circumstances in each area. Schumann's comparison of Brahms to Beethoven created an anxiety to fulfill a certain standard, which is most likely one of the reasons Brahms did not produce a symphony until almost two decades after. (Korsyn. "Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence," 6.)

⁶ For more on this, especially in relation to the Symphonies, refer to Raymond Knapp's *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony*. This book outlines the path from "Neue Bahnen" to the eventual composition of his symphonies.

works: “Seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer’s first symphony with such tense anticipation.”⁷ These expectations, both external and internal, became significant motivations in Brahms’ search for self-expression.⁸

Since the publication of “Neue Bahnen,” Brahms’ piano sonatas have long been referred to as “Veiled Symphonies,” yet neither the validity of this description nor its interpretive values have been demonstrated in research or performance. It is obvious to the astute listener that his piano sonatas exist in a world apart from his mature piano works. They are of a distinctly virtuosic nature, yet not necessarily idiomatic to the instrument.⁹ They contain octave doublings during leaps in extreme registers, almost demanding the addition of a second pianist and foreshadowing Brahms’ choice of two pianists in many subsequent arrangements of his orchestral works. It has often been remarked, most notably by Wagner, that Brahms’ orchestral music contains likenesses to piano and chamber music writing.¹⁰ Congruently, the piano-symphonic style preserves many of the ideals inherent in orchestral music.

Brahms’ piano sonatas are of a distinctly different style from works of the same genre by his predecessors. Their unusual style begs for a study of the relationship between the piano sonatas and the idea of a symphonic style in piano writing. Brahms composed all of his sonatas and sonata movement works for solo piano—the Sonatas Op. 1, 2, and 5, and Scherzo Op. 4—during his early period.¹¹ Although it is now known that

⁷ Hanslick, *Hanslick’s Music Criticisms*, 125.

⁸ Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony*, 5.

⁹ In this instance refers to the comfort of playing.

¹⁰ For more on this see “The Opinions of Wagner and Brahms as Applied to Each Other—Critics of Other Years” and *Wagner’s Prose Works*.

¹¹ Brahms’ piano works can be separated into three distinct periods of productions: sonatas, variations, and short form works such as intermezzi.

he had originally intended to compose more sonatas, he never returned to the solo piano sonata in the three decades of composing that followed.¹²

To understand Brahms' relationship with the piano sonata, it is important to consider its role as one of the most important and popular genres in keyboard history. The piano sonata rose to its prominent place in the piano repertoire during the Classical era as a popular form of entertainment for amateur pianists to read at home. It would eventually exceed this status with Beethoven's thirty-two sonatas and reach a peak as a work requiring the interpretation of an expert.¹³ With the death of Beethoven it was nearly impossible to imagine that anyone would be able to further develop the piano sonata in the way that Beethoven had conceived it. Sonatas continued to be composed, but there was a serious decline in their production around the year 1830, with fewer sonatas being published than ever before.¹⁴ As William S. Newman notes in *The Sonata Since Beethoven*, it was as if both the symphony and sonata became lacklustre because contemporary composers failed to meet the standard set forth by Beethoven.¹⁵

The piano sonata, the genre of choice for his emergence as a composer, reveals Brahms' taste for old styles. This preference for old styles is frequently described as evolving through his interest in counterpoint, fugue, and passacaglia. However, at the time the piano sonata was regarded as a conservative choice because prevailing pianistic preferences favored shorter character pieces and miniatures.¹⁶ Sonata form is also one of

¹² In the holograph score of the C Major Sonata, it is referred to as "No.4" (Kirby, "Brahms and the Piano Sonata," 163.)

¹³ Kirby, "Brahms and the Piano Sonata," 164.

¹⁴ The decline in sonata production is due, in part, to the rising popularity of other forms such as character pieces. (Kirby, "Brahms' and the Piano Sonata," 164.) and (Newman, *The Sonata After Beethoven*, 9.)

¹⁵ Newman, *Sonata Since Beethoven*, 12.

¹⁶ The prevalence of early styles in his works comes from his first piano studies with Eduard Marxsen who nurtured Brahms' interest in the past, especially through the works of Bach.

the more rudimentary aspects of symphonic composition to be mastered. That Brahms made his debut as a composer with sonatas and sonata movements is important evidence for the sonatas being presented in a symphonic style.¹⁷

This study will explore Brahms' piano sonatas within the premise of the "Neue Bahnen" article. First, his orchestral works will be discussed to identify the particularities of his orchestral writing style. Next, Brahms' arrangements of his own orchestral works for one and two pianos will be surveyed to identify elements of transferability between genres, and to provide links for identifying symphonic elements in the piano sonatas. Then, the rise of monumentality as an aesthetic ideal of the nineteenth-century will be explored for its relationship to the symphonies and piano sonatas. Consideration will also be given to historical elements such as Brahms' own performance traits, performance practice regarding the arrangement and transcription of orchestral works in the nineteenth-century, and the role that Brahms' pianos may have played in his development of the piano sonatas. With the support of my experience performing Brahms sonatas and orchestral arrangements, I will demonstrate how to incorporate a more symphonic interpretation into performance. All musical examples in this document are taken from editions available in the public domain.

¹⁷ In fact, Schumann had suggested a different ordering for Brahms' first opuses that placed other instrumental and vocal works first, and the Sonata No.1 as Op.5. (Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony*, 3.)

II. Orchestral Techniques: Discovery of Orchestral Style

The Path to the Symphony and the Role of Piano Works

Schumann's high expectations, as revealed in "Neue Bahnen," created for Brahms a pressing concern to immediately begin working towards the career goals set forth in the article. Brahms' relationship with the Schumanns continued to flourish, and with Robert Schumann's musical guidance, he completed the Piano Sonata Op.5 in 1854.¹⁸ This work is considered to be the most symphonic out of the three sonatas as it pushes the capacities of the performer and instrument farthest, with technically demanding octave passages as a primary feature of the work. Although it is not an actual symphony, this work is the first in a series of compositions following "Neue Bahnen" that absorbed his need to compose a symphony.

Following the three piano sonatas, Brahms composed a two-piano sonata that further fulfilled the need for expansion that was already felt in the Sonata No. 3. This new work was the Sonata for Two Pianos in D Minor. Walter Frisch states that "The medium suggests that Brahms had already found the solo piano too limited to contain his ideas."¹⁹ In the current literature, the beginning of this work has been linked to Schumann's attempted suicide as an expression of Brahms' grief.²⁰ He had originally intended to compose a sonata for two pianos and then turn it into a symphony; therefore, it underwent many instrumentation changes throughout its development. This work aptly epitomizes Brahms' struggle with his, so to speak, "symphonic anxiety."

¹⁸ Brahms completed most of the work on this sonata during his stay with the Schumanns in 1853. He played the sonata for Schumann to obtain his feedback on the work before leaving from his stay there. (May, *Life of Brahms*, 139.)

¹⁹ Frisch *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*, 30.

²⁰ May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms Vol. I*, 174.

Although the sketches for the Sonata in D Minor for Two Pianos no longer exist, Brahms' letters help us to piece together the genesis of this work, and also shed light on its importance.²¹

"I wish I could give my D minor Sonata a long rest. I have often played the first three movements with Frau Schumann. (Improved.) Actually, not even two pianos are sufficient for me."²²

Brahms intended to transform this work into a symphony; however, he was young and inexperienced at the time and therefore needed help to realize this vision. Between this and his next letter to Joachim, Brahms received the help he needed from his proclaimed "disciple" Otto Grimm, who was much more experienced in the art of orchestration.²³ In a subsequent letter, Brahms describes the transformation of this work:

"Concerning my score, you have probably thought to yourself, and I have also entreated Frau Schumann to tell you that whatever good can be found in it I owe to *Grimm*, who stands by me with the best of advice. The shortcomings and defects, which probably are not too well hidden, were either overlooked by Grimm, or remain because of my stubbornness. I also want to tell you that originally I mainly wanted only the low D to be heard, and therefore have the F—B flat so weak in the clarinet and bassoon. Actually I was always pleased that everything is so compressed and short, don't know however, whether it is right, especially for orchestra? At the ending, it somehow seems to me that it just ends, and sometimes, that the coda should only now begin!"²⁴

Brahms realized the limitations of his capacities as a composer by acknowledging that this work would not be successful as a symphony. It seems that early in his career, the piano was the only outlet available for him to express symphonic ideas.

The Piano Sonata in D Minor for Two Pianos represents Brahms' first symphonic attempt, albeit for piano, following the composition of the three piano sonatas. The

²¹ In perfectionist fashion, Brahms was infamous for disposing of working drafts, only concerned with presenting the finished product.

²² Avins, *Brahms Letters*, 47.

²³ Avins, *Brahms Letters*, 50.

²⁴ Avins, *Brahms Letters*, 50.

characteristic elements that define the D Minor Sonata—the tragic trills, octaves, and tremolandos— are less successful in an orchestral setting, and much more expressively convincing on the piano. This is perhaps because of the terrifying rumble they create on the instrument, and Brahms’ insufficient orchestration skills. On the other hand, the orchestra has several different bombastic, rumbling effects without which this piece takes on an entirely different color. Brahms had originally completed three movements of the Sonata in D Minor, which he would play frequently with Clara Schumann in her home. He then attempted to orchestrate the existing movements and only then did he realize their flawed conception. He reformatted the first two movements and abandoned the third for completely new material.²⁵ This last transformation turned it into a piano concerto—the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor Op. 15. This concerto still preserves much of the original symphonic intent evidenced by the antagonistic relationship between piano and orchestra. In fact, the first movement is the longest that Brahms ever composed, with a full orchestral exposition tutti that also contains more thematic groups than any other concerto at the time.²⁶ Although his first attempts at a symphony failed, the Piano Concerto No. 1 partially fulfills Schumann’s prophecy as a work combining massed forces, although in this case it is the massed forces of piano and orchestra rather than that of chorus and orchestra.²⁷

The Piano Concerto No. 1 was only one of several orchestral works that Brahms’ completed during his search for symphonic expression. At the same time that the piano

²⁵ It has been speculated that material from the third was re-used by Brahms in the German Requiem “Behold the Flesh.” (May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms Vol.I*, 174.)

²⁶ Hepokoski, “Monumentality and Formal Processes in the Concerto Op.15,” 218.

²⁷ Instead of amassing the voices of a chorus with orchestra, Brahms’ first “symphony” came about in the D minor Concerto as a work that amassed the combined forces of the piano, as a symphonic instrument, with the orchestra.

sonatas were undergoing their symphonic transformations, Brahms was also working on the orchestral Serenades Op. 11 and 16, published in 1860. It was through these pieces that he worked on his orchestration and orchestral style. Brahms shows a more studious approach to orchestration in the serenades by using the individual instruments in idiomatic ways and traditional combinations.²⁸ However, he also uses non-traditional orchestration. For instance, in the Serenade Op. 16, the orchestra is diminished with the violins being omitted. This allowed for the deep melodies that Brahms preferred to be expressed more idiomatically in the violas and cellos without having to compete against doubled violin sections. After this period of symphonic yearning following the publishing of “Neue Bahnen,” there was a gap between the first symphonic attempts of the 1850’s, and the Symphony No. 1, which would not be completed until 1876. During this gap, Brahms would continue to solidify his place as a composer for piano, and make several significant contributions to his piano *oeuvre* in the form of variations. Through the variations, Brahms solidified his techniques for piano virtuosity and continuous compositional style.²⁹ During his variation period he also composed a significant work for both piano and orchestra: the Haydn Variations Op. 34A and B.

As a result of Schumann’s initial endorsement, the public expectation for Brahms’ Symphonies was so high that it would be difficult for Brahms to avoid criticism, regardless of the quality of his writing. When he did finally compose symphonies, their reception was varied and often less positive than Schumann’s original prophecy.³⁰ Most notably, Wagner was an outspoken opponent of Brahms and his work. He criticized Brahms publicly, making jabs at his preference for old techniques. In an essay titled “On

²⁸ Knapp, *Challenge of the Symphony*, 65.

²⁹ Musgrave, *Music of Brahms*, 51.

³⁰ Frisch, “Patterns of Reception” from *Brahms Four Symphonies*, 141-161.

the Application of the Music on the Drama” published in 1879, Wagner demotes Brahms’ symphonies by referring to them as a disguised form of chamber music.³¹

“The said symphonic compositions of our newest school —let us call it the Romantic-classical—are distinguished from the wild-stock of our so-called Programme-music not only by the regretted absence of a programme, but in especial by a certain clammy cast of melody which its creators have transplanted from their heretofore retiring "Chamber-music"... what had previously been dressed as Quintets and the like, was now served up as Symphony.”³²

Borne out by his preference for contrapuntal writing and the conversational interaction between “choirs of instruments,” Brahms’ symphonies certainly bear a likeness to chamber music. This type of orchestral expression creates for the listener a personal experience where the music can be experienced intimately.³³ Although this quality was criticized during his lifetime, it is one of the defining factors linking the piano sonatas to symphonies.

Orchestration and Orchestral Techniques

The musical community waited expectantly for Brahms’ first symphony for twenty-three years after the publishing of “Neue Bahnen.” Although there are many shared qualities in each symphony that typify Brahms’ symphonic style, each one of the symphonies is expressed in a way that is directly related to the musical content. In addition, the orchestral technique that developed out of the symphonies was a style of his own making and one that reflected his piano writing. However, due to overlapping styles

³¹ This analogy begs the conclusion be drawn that if Brahms’ symphonies are disguised chamber music, and his piano sonatas disguised symphonies, then everything he ever wrote was essentially oriented around a chamber music relationship.

³² Wagner, “On the Application of Music to Drama,” 181.

³³ Carl Dahlhaus discusses the perceptions of Brahms’ symphonies as bearing likenesses to chamber-music in *Nineteenth-Century Music* as evidence of monumental writing.

of writing in the sonatas and symphonies, the pursuit of identifying differences between orchestral and pianistic writing in each is challenging.

It is important to note that Brahms received no formal training in the technique of orchestration. Most of what he learned was self-taught or came from his own personal copy of Berlioz's treatise *Grand Traité d'Instrumentation et d'Orchestration Modernes*. Brahms also learned about orchestration from his friends Otto Grimm and Joseph Joachim, even having formally studied counterpoint with the latter.³⁴ While there were many treatises dedicated to the art of orchestration, and certainly many available to Brahms at the time, there was no such thing as "standard orchestration techniques" and these treatises became out-dated shortly after being written.³⁵ Generally, Brahms' instrumentation conforms to trends from the first quarter of the nineteenth-century and directly correlates to what is present in Beethoven's symphonies. This instrumentation includes two of each wind and brass instrument plus three trombones, the addition of two more horns (for a total of four, to Beethoven's two) and, exceptionally, the use of the tuba in his Second Symphony, and contrabassoon in the First Symphony.³⁶

Brahms' choice of instrumentation directly rejected Wagner's contemporary heavy-bodied orchestra.³⁷ In contrast to many other composers of the nineteenth-century, who primarily sought to highlight "instrumental effect," Brahms' was more focused on

³⁴ Knapp, *Challenge of the Symphony*, 63-4.

³⁵ Carse. *History of Orchestration* 293.

³⁶ Harisson, *Brahms and his Four Symphonies*, 72.

³⁷ Wagner's orchestra exceeds average numbers of players demanded from typical orchestras at the time. Though, Wagner's orchestra was not accepted until well after he had written many of his mature works. For more information on this see *The History of Orchestration* by Adam Carse, Chapter XII "The Period of Wagner."

content.³⁸ He used instrumental effects not merely for color, but to accentuate harmonic richness and rhythmic drive. This is not to say that he did not produce great instrumental effects. In fact, as will be shown later on, the instrumental colors he chose directly reflect the musical content. Although each symphony is different, there are several traits that pervade each work. Several of these characteristics, which as a whole create the distinct “Brahmsian” orchestral sound, will here be identified and explained in succession. These characteristics have been chosen for their frequent appearance in Brahms’ orchestral writing, and in the piano works beyond.

In an unusual treatment of the orchestra at the time, Brahms used groups of instruments in opposition. Raymond Knapp refers to these groups as “choirs of instruments” that interact with each other conversationally and share equal parts of thematic material.³⁹ This is a style of writing that directly comes out of the Beethoven tradition. Most often these two groups consist of the winds versus the strings. Example 1 illustrates how the two choirs of instruments share equal material in counterpoint with each other.

³⁸ Wagner, along with Berlioz and Liszt, would fall into the category of “instrumental effect” in his choices of instrumentation. Brahms was in direct opposition to these composers, most notably to Wagner with whom he had a very public strenuous relationship with, in his choice of instrumentation, use of instruments, and size of orchestra.

³⁹ (Knapp, *Challenge of the Symphony*, 63.) and (Carse, *The History of Orchestration*, 296.)

Symphonie Nr.1

(C moll)

für großes Orchester

Johannes Brahms, Op.68
(Veröffentlicht 1877)

Un poco sostenuto

2 Flöten
f legato

2 Oboen
f legato

2 Klarinetten in B
f legato

2 Fagotte
f legato

Kontrafagott
f

4 Hörner
in C $\frac{3}{4}$
in Es $\frac{3}{4}$
f

2 Trompeten in C
f

Pauken in C u. G.
f

1. Violine
f espr. e legato

2. Violine
f espr. e legato

Bratsche
divi.
f espr. e legato

Violoncell
f espr. e legato

Kontrabaß
f pesante

Un poco sostenuto

Ex. 1. Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68, I. Un poco sostenuto, mm. 1-7
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

Another characteristic found in all the symphonies, and other orchestral works for that matter, is woodwinds playing in pairs.⁴⁰ They are used in combination, usually for melodic lines and filling in rich harmony, and rarely exist alone as soloists, as shown in

⁴⁰ Carse, *History of Orchestration*, 296.

Example 1.⁴¹ The pairing of instruments contributes to the thickness of his part writing and full chromatic harmony. This will be discussed further in relation to thickness of textures. There are some exceptions to the pairing rule, such as the third movement from the Symphony No. 3 in which several wind instruments are featured as soloists.

The horns act as cohesive elements in Brahms' symphonies, tying together the wind and string sections of the orchestra. As such, they play almost constantly with both "choirs of instruments."⁴² The horns contribute to the thick texture of his writing style, which is another identifying feature of the "Brahmsian" orchestral sound. This thick texture is especially identifiable because of ever-present cross-rhythmic effects, such as those shown below in Example 2 from the Symphony No. 3, which shows the simultaneous utilization of hemiolas and syncopations in the accompanimental texture of the strings.

Accompanimental figures in the orchestral works also contain other "thickeners" such as octave-doublings and double-stops in the strings. In fact, one of the unique aspects of Brahms' compositional style was his treatment of the accompaniment and bass line as equal to the melodic line. Brahms' only composition student, Gustav Jenner, recorded Brahms' remarks on the value of independent accompaniment and bass lines in his memoirs about studying with the great composer.

"The determining role of the melody and of clearly perceived basses created in good counterpoint was an absolute requirement for him, one that remained in force even when the overall design of the song was at its most artful. Brahms, as I have mentioned, loved to elevate the accompaniment to a fully equal, even independent, element and sometimes to move it canonically in relation to the voice."⁴³

⁴¹ Carse, *History of Orchestration*, 297.

⁴² Carse, *History of Orchestration*, 296.

⁴³ Jenner, "Brahms as Man, Teacher and Artist," 403.

These thick accompaniments make balance more difficult to achieve against the more thinly written melodic lines in performance. This issue is also relevant to the piano sonatas and will be further explored further in the chapter on interpretation (P.57.)

The image displays two systems of a musical score for Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90, I. Allegro con brio, mm. 77-86. The score is in F major and 4/4 time. The first system (mm. 77-81) features a woodwind section (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in B-flat, Bassoon) and a string section (Violins I & II, Viola, Cello, Double Bass). The woodwinds have melodic lines, while the strings provide a thick, rhythmic accompaniment. The second system (mm. 82-86) continues the same instrumentation. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'div.' (diviso), 'f' (forte), 'agitato' (agitated), and 'cresc.' (crescendo). The tempo is marked 'Allegro con brio'. The score is marked with 'E' at the beginning of the first system and 'E' at the beginning of the second system.

Ex. 2. Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90, I. Allegro con brio, mm. 77-86
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

Doubled parts in the bass register are common in the orchestral works and are present to fortify the bass line. This characteristic is also common to the piano sonatas. Camilla Cai postulates that the high frequency of doubled bass lines, especially in the earlier piano repertoire, is a result of the more conservative instruments that Brahms regularly worked with.⁴⁴ However, the orchestral works show that instrumental differences do not account for a heavy bass, and therefore doubled bass lines must be considered objectively as an element of style. This interpretation is in alignment with Gustav Jenner's accounts of Brahms' teaching.⁴⁵ The doubled bass lines provide a solid support on which Brahms could build his orchestral sound.

Brahms chose to express his melodies through pairs of woodwinds or strings, rather than having the instruments act alone as soloists. He frequently wrote his melodies in doubled thirds or sixths, a technique that went hand in hand with his preference for paired woodwinds. This technique surely comes from his experience playing Hungarian folk music on tour with Remenyi. Double-stops in thirds and sixths were a common feature of gypsy and Hungarian folk violin playing.⁴⁶ As shown in Example 3 from the Symphony No. 3, pairs of woodwinds weave a sentimental melody—one that would not have the same effect if expressed in a single line.

⁴⁴ In the essay "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of his Late Piano Works," Camilla Cai presents the argument that Brahms' instruments were designed in a way that negates the balance issues that pianists perceive on today's modern instruments. These same balance issues would not have existed on the pianos of Brahms' time.

⁴⁵ Jenner, "Johannes Brahms as Man, Teacher, and Artist," 403.

⁴⁶ Many string techniques of the *style hongrois* made their way into Brahms' musical language as a result of his relationship with Hungarian musicians and personal collection of Hungarian music. For more on this see Jonathan Bellman's *The Syle Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe*.

130

Fl. *pp dolce*

Ob.

Klar. (B) *dolce*

Fag. *dolce*

Hr. (C) *pp dolce*

1. Viol. *più p*

2. Viol. *più p*

Br.

Vcl. *più p*

K. B. *più p*

Ex. 3. Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90, III. Poco allegretto, mm. 130-135
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

In Brahms' symphonies, it is not uncommon for the whole orchestra to be playing simultaneously for large portions of the work. This style of writing creates a wide-spread vertical texture that contains heavily orchestrated chords and rich harmonies. A contributing factor to these wide-spaced chords are Brahms' string parts, which utilize the entire ambitus of each instrument, often shifting suddenly from extremely low to extremely high registers. These elements are best exemplified in Example 4, which is taken from the transition to the development in the Symphony No. 3 first movement. In this example, the towering chords are spread out over the entire orchestra and the strings make a wide slope inwards from the extreme registers of each instrument.

8

Fl.
Ob.
Klar. (B)
Fag.
(C)
Hr.
(F)
Trpt. (F)
Pec.
1 Viol.
2 Viol.
Br.
Vcl.
K-B.
71
Fl.
Ob.
Klar. (B)
Fag.
(C)
Hr.
(F)
Trpt. (F)
1 Viol.
2 Viol.
Br.
Vcl.
K-B.
J. B. 3

Ex. 4. Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90, I. Allegro con brio, mm. 68-76
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

Characteristics of Style

Although Wagner was typically critical of the young composer, in one instance, a complimentary review of Brahms' early compositions points to an important element of his compositional style: the technique of developing variation.⁴⁷

“Herr Johannes Brahms was once so kind as to play me a piece of his own with serious variations; it showed me that he understands no jokes, and in itself I thought it excellent.”⁴⁸

In fact, critics often remarked on Brahms' distinct variation technique.⁴⁹ In one of the first reviews of Brahms' early works, Adolf Schubring focuses on variation in the Sonata Op. 1:

“The construction of this sonata, and especially its first movement (there is a first part that is repeated, then a development and a reprise of the first part, and a long coda) offers no obstacles to understanding. Less easy to grasp at first is the thematic work, which Brahms employs not merely in the development section, but almost without interruption from the beginning to the end.”⁵⁰

Furthermore, Schoenberg also took a great interest in Brahms due to the intricate inner workings of his variation technique. Despite the common opinion of Brahms as a classicist, Schoenberg argues in his essay “Brahms the Progressive” that Brahms should in fact be considered a forward-thinking figure. It was through this essay that Schoenberg first gave a name to the technique of continuous variation as *thematische arbeit*. He defined it as the act by which material for an entire work is derived from a single small

⁴⁷ While Wagner did not often refer to Brahms by name in his writings, he alluded to Brahms through the use of several key phrases. These phrases have since been identified by the translator of Wagner's complete prose workse, William Ashton Ellis.

⁴⁸ Wagner, “About Conducting,” 348.

⁴⁹ Hanslick, “Brahms [1862],” 82-86. And Schubring, “Five Early Works by Brahms [1862],” 195-215.

⁵⁰ Schubring, “Five Early Works of Brahms,” 199.

motive or group of notes, many techniques of which come from the classical era.⁵¹

Theorists like Walter Frisch have further supported Schoenberg's arguments by verifying that the ability to vary thematic content, thereby creating unity across an entire work, was important to the success of a symphonic composition in the nineteenth-century.⁵²

Brahms links the piano sonatas to an orchestral style by using developing variation in combination with integrated orchestral techniques. The opening theme of the Sonata Op. 1 bears a strong resemblance to the opening theme of Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata.⁵³ The immediate sense of similarity between these themes is due to several identifiable features shared between the two: the vital rhythmic pulse that utilizes the dotted rhythm as its main feature, the full blocked chord voicing, motives that use the leap of an octave, and the shared key of C Major.

In the Sonata Op. 1, the first theme fragment, shown in Example 5A, provides the basic material for the movement and is further developed in the Finale. Example 5A-F shows all the ways that the first theme is modified. The first theme (Example 5A) becomes the second (Example 5B), which is very closely related in pitch, but contrasted in mood. Examples 5D and E show a third derivation of this theme and its transformation into a hidden inner voice. Finally, Example 5F shows the conclusion of the work and the opening theme of the Finale, which is closely related to the opening statement.

⁵¹ Some of these techniques include irregular phrase lengths, and continuous development of a theme. (Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," 422.)

⁵² "A high value was placed by critics not only on the quality and the development of individual themes within movements but also on thematic unity or relationships that act as a binding force for an entire work." (Frisch, *Brahms Four Symphonies*, 16.)

⁵³ This similarity between themes was publicly noted in Hanslick's review of the early works.

A. *Allegro* (♩ = 80) *f*

B. *p ben marcato*

C. *a tempo con espress.* *p* *dolce*

D. *Poco ritenuto* *pp due corde*

E. *pp sospirando*

F. *Finale* *Allegro con fuoco* (♩ = 120) *f*

Ex. 5 A-F. Piano Sonata in C Major, Op. 1 No. 1

Schirmer Edition (1918)

I. Allegro: A. mm.1-2, B. mm.17-18, C. mm.39-40, D. mm.51-52, E. mm.59-62.

IV. Finale- Allegro con fuoco: F. mm.1

All three piano sonatas are cyclical works and exhibit strong thematic continuity across movements. In the Sonata Op. 2 in F-sharp minor, the very first motive provides the basic material for the entire movement and subsequently the three other movements that follow. In the Sonata Op. 5 in F Minor, the first movement is developed out of a four-note motive, the second and fourth movements are based upon the same theme of descending thirds, and the fifth movement develops out of the timpani motive from the fourth movement.

Schubring described the inner workings of the second sonata as an integrated form of developing variation:⁵⁴

“Its principal and subsidiary melodies originate from mosaic particles before our eyes. And what is most astonishing is that all these melodies, so diverse in character, are all derived from one and the same basic motive which attains its broadest development and melodic unfolding only in the finale.”⁵⁵

Furthermore, the continuous fragmenting and developing of material mimics the way that different orchestral instruments exchange material.

By the time Brahms composed his symphonies, he had acquired the skills to more subtly integrate the technique of developing variation. The piano sonatas exhibit more obvious thematic links than the symphonies, which display a more complex internal structure that carries a different kind of continuity throughout the work—one that is also intrinsically tied to its expression. The Symphony No. 3 contains many qualities that make it well-suited to a comparison with the piano sonatas. Regular performances of this work are similar in length to the piano sonatas with an average time of thirty minutes in most performances.⁵⁶ This symphony is based on the notes F-A-F standing for “Frei aber Froh,” which was Brahms’ own personal interpretation of Joachim’s motto F-A-E “Frei aber Einsam.” The F-A-E motto can also be found as the theme of the B section in the fifth movement Finale of the Sonata Op. 5.

⁵⁴ Although the Sonata Op. 2 was composed first, it appears in published order as the second sonata. Out of the three, this sonata also displays the most complex compositional inner workings.

⁵⁵ Schubring, “The Five Early Works of Brahms,” 202.

⁵⁶ Walter Frisch provides a survey of general performance lengths in “Traditions of Performance” from *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*.

III. Bearbeitungen⁵⁷

A Brief History

The piano developed over the course of the nineteenth-century as an instrument of virtuosic power and congruently as a rival of the growing contemporary orchestra. As larger pianos were being built with sturdier frames and more octaves, the instrument came closer to being able to imitate the grandness of an orchestra; as a result, composers began to use the instrument more frequently in this way.⁵⁸ Arrangements and transcriptions began to fill an important sub-section of nineteenth-century piano repertoire and composers frequently used the instrument as a means for disseminating new compositions, including operatic and symphonic works. Raymond Knapp suggests that arrangements led to the blending of orchestral and pianistic styles.

“As arrangers of their own music or that of others, composers became adept at transforming idiomatic orchestral music into piano music; as orchestrators, they became equally adept at translating piano music into orchestral music. Inevitably, to a certain extent the two styles became one.”⁵⁹

In this period, more four-hand piano arrangements were published than ever before, particularly in the case of Beethoven’s symphonies.⁶⁰ In fact, Beethoven’s symphonies were disproportionately arranged more than any other works over the course of the century, a pleasant side effect of the monumental status he gained after his death. The accessibility of pianos in most homes as a form of entertainment contributed to the success of arrangements. In some ways orchestral arrangements acted like modern day

⁵⁷ German for “arrangements.”

⁵⁸ Plantinga, “The Piano and the Nineteenth-Century,” 11-12.

⁵⁹ Knapp, *Challenge of the Symphony*, 62.

⁶⁰ Christensen, “Four-Hand Piano and Geographies of Musical Reception,” 257.

recordings: making the general public familiar with a composer's work, sometimes even before the orchestral premiere.⁶¹

Arrangements or Transcriptions? Brahms' Orchestral Works at the Piano

Brahms' arrangements and transcriptions occupy a special place in his *oeuvre*. He arranged most of his own instrumental works for the piano, including all four of the symphonies.⁶² Additionally, as a young virtuoso pianist, he often included orchestral and operatic transcriptions on his recital programs.⁶³ His attention to this repertoire explains the close relationship felt between the piano sonatas and symphonies. Studying Brahms' arrangements reveals how his orchestral style easily transfers to the piano, the type of modifications that he would make to suit an idiomatic performance, and how his style of writing for both mediums is closely linked.

It is important to consider the proper terminology when exploring Brahms' orchestral works at the piano. The two terms predominantly used to describe these works are arrangement and transcription. Although they are often used interchangeably in the literature on the topic, they do not necessarily mean the same thing, especially in regards to Brahms' compositions. According to Howard-Jones, an arrangement preserves the content and contour of the original work on a different instrument, while transcriptions take material from the original work and create a new work by re-composing and expanding upon borrowed themes.⁶⁴ Composers like Franz Liszt composed works of both

⁶¹ Christensen, "Four-Hand Piano and Geographies of Musical Reception," 256.

⁶² Brahms was also in the habit of collecting folk music from eastern countries. His Hungarian Dances for piano four-hands and solo piano are interpretations, through transcription, of a particular Hungarian folk style.

⁶³ May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms Vol.I*, 85-87.

⁶⁴ Howard-Jones, "Arrangements and Transcriptions," 305.

types, though more often focusing on the re-composition of old material. In the paraphrases (i.e. Liszt's name for transcriptions) he would make popular operatic and symphonic works his own by embellishing at the piano. In his arrangements of Beethoven's symphonies, the integrity of the original work remains the same. However, Brahms primarily composed works that can be identified strictly as arrangements: in his orchestral works at the piano, he translates the material piano by only changing what is necessary. Brahms' arrangements are successful in an alternative medium because he preserves the structure and musical content of the original, while adjusting for a more idiomatic performance. Here, in accordance with the definition above, Brahms' works will continue to be referred to as arrangements.

Brahms' approach to arranging differed from those around him. While four-hand symphony arrangements were most common throughout the nineteenth-century, his preference was markedly towards two-piano arrangements. Robert Pascall notes that this medium allowed Brahms to use the registers of the piano twice-over. This facilitated the uninterrupted expression of contrapuntal writing and the preservation of individual lines.

“Arranging for two pianos for four hands enables a version that can be truer to the original and more comprehensive concerning notational details with regard to the orchestral composition than an arrangement for one piano-four hands. This is because every register can be used twice when arranging for two pianos and four hands, thereby allowing overlapping themes, counter-themes, accompanying figuration, etc. to be presented in a relatively unaltered form.”⁶⁵

In contrast, Liszt composed his Beethoven symphony arrangements for one piano (two hands) despite the fact that preserving the musical content of the symphonies was virtually impossible in the chosen medium and required significant recomposing.⁶⁶ As a remedy, and with some wishful thinking for a third hand, Liszt would often notate

⁶⁵ Pascall, “Einleitung,” XIX.

⁶⁶ Wilde, “Transcriptions for Piano,” 171-172.

“crucial” parts that didn't fit on a third line that wasn't meant to be played. Additionally, he would sometimes provide an entirely different *ossia*, leaving out and keeping in different material. In general, Brahms' arrangements served several practical purposes—in his early compositional period, they acted as études for his own discovery of a compositional style, later they became a method for disseminating his works to a wider audience and providing an accurate retelling of a work in another medium.⁶⁷

Translation from Instrumental to Piano Works

There are several consistencies that are important to identify here as a starting place for considering Brahms' arrangements in comparison to the piano sonatas:

- In the piano arrangements, the material from his symphonies is most often presented in the exact same octave range.
- Material is only modified to suit a more idiomatic performance at the piano.
- Expressive and dynamic markings are altered in the piano arrangements according to the capabilities of the instrument.
- Experiences of depth and resonance are different from orchestra to piano and therefore provide important clues as to the relationship between these works.

⁶⁷ It is important to note that Brahms' orchestral transcriptions always followed, and never preceded, the original work. However, since Brahms notoriously destroyed drafts when working on a piece, this is not to say that the two couldn't have been envisioned or worked out at the same time and then published separately later since it is known that Brahms composed at the piano, as many composers of the time did. Exceptionally, in the case of the Symphony No. 3, although the arrangement was composed second, it was heard in a private performance first before the symphonic premiere.

The Haydn Variations, composed in 1873, represent a key stepping stone in Brahms' development of orchestration, and arrangement techniques.⁶⁸ This piece was envisioned simultaneously as a work for piano and as a work for orchestra and shows Brahms' cleanest and most precise use of standard orchestral techniques and his preference for clear contrapuntal lines. One such orchestral technique, that is also characteristic of many piano works, is the composition of melodies in thirds and sixths, such as the ones that are a dominant feature of the Haydn Variations theme. This same technique marks the first entry of the solo piano an earlier orchestral work, the Piano Concerto Op. 15.

Sixths are featured prominently as an important technical skill for pianists in the 51 Exercises that Brahms began working on in 1850, during the period of his early compositions, and was completed in 1893, during the period of his latest works. In fact, the 51 Exercises emphasize the techniques that would be necessary to play piano works in a symphonic manner. The exercises focus on what Musgrave refers to as "mirroring" techniques, which are crucial to phrasing contrapuntal writing and independent control over different metric subdivisions.⁶⁹ These mirroring techniques have the pianist execute cross rhythms in contrary motion, with both hands moving symmetrically in opposite directions. Then the rhythms switch hands at the top of the progression to descend again (Example 6).

⁶⁸ Brahms frequently used variation pieces to study different genres and composition styles while perfecting his own skills.

⁶⁹ Musgrave, *Music of Brahms*, 164.



Ex. 6. 51 Exercises, WoO 6, No. 1A, mm.1-4 and 17-20
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

However similar Brahms' arrangements are to their original sources, several different techniques are used to provide a more idiomatic rendering at the piano. There are many voice crossing issues that occur when transcribing an orchestral work for one piano. Brahms uses octave-displacement to relieve the cluttered writing that occurs because of voice crossing issues. He also modifies the sonority of chords and articulations by using rolled chords.⁷⁰ In the original orchestral works, sonority is perceived in a three-dimensional way due to the physical distance of different voice groups, whereas at the piano, the sound becomes one-dimensional due to the homogenous tone of the instrument.

In the piano sonatas, rolled chords are used in a distinctly symphonic way: they prolong harmonic resonances, emphasize individual lines, and allow access to notes that are outside the reach of an average hand span. Examples of each of these uses can be found in all three sonatas. For instance, in the Piano Sonata Op. 2, shown in Example 7A,

⁷⁰ Pascall, "Einleitung," XIX-XXII.

the rolled chords create the resonance needed for the un-damped upper register of the piano.



Ex. 7A. Piano Sonata Op. 2, I. Allegro non troppo, ma energico, mm. 1-3
Peters Edition (1910)

In Example 7B the rolled chords highlight the independence of each line in the left hand.



Ex. 7B. Piano Sonata Op. 5, IV. Allegro moderato, ma rubato, mm. 293-297
Peters Edition (1910)

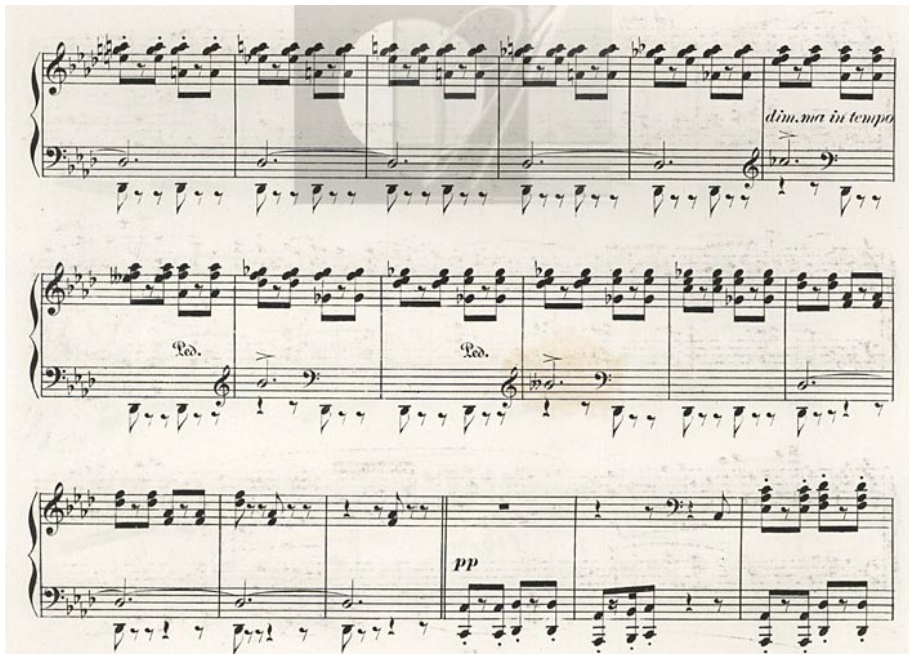
And in Example 7C, the rolled chords allow the pianist to access notes that are impossible to reach with just two hands.



Ex. 7C. Sonata Op. 2, IV. Finale- Introduzione. Sostenuto, mm. 116-124
Peters Edition (1910)

Perceived Orchestral and Instrumental Textures in the Sonatas

The orchestral arrangements expose many representations of symphonic textures and instrumental sounds in piano writing. A composer's drafts can be useful for shedding light on the thought processes that went into creating a work; however, Brahms was notorious for destroying the working drafts of each piece, leaving only the final product. Scholars are thus fortunate to have access to three different copies of Brahms' manuscript and corrections for the Sonata Op. 5.⁷¹ One section in particular from the fourth movement is modified over these drafts. In the first edition, published by Senff (Example 8A), the left hand discontinues the repeated D-flats in Measure 90 to jump up and play the melodic line in the same register as the right hand.



Ex. 8A. Sonata Op. 5, IV. Finale: Allegro moderato ma rubato, mm. 85-102
First Edition, Senff (1854)

⁷¹ There are three total copies of the Sonata Op. 5 containing Brahms' handwriting: the original manuscript in Brahms' hand, as well as two copies of the first edition published by Senff, which Brahms himself wrote and pasted corrections into.

While the second revisions did not contain any changes to this passage, the following third set of revisions, written in Brahms' hand on his copy of the original Senff edition, shows that he wanted to continue the D-flats independently from the melody. Example 8B shows the same excerpt as published in the collected edition of Brahms' works, edited by Mandyscewski and published by Breitkopf and Härtel, which incorporates these changes. Many subsequent editions reflect the changes from both the second and third revisions, although certain contemporary urtext editions choose to ignore them without explanation. The melody, woodwind-like accompaniment texture, and the accompaniment D-flats are more independently expressed in the revised version. These revisions show that Brahms was not satisfied by the sacrifice of one line for the sake of another, therefore proving an instrumental way of thinking.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano sonata. The first system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The right hand features a complex, woodwind-like texture with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The left hand plays a steady accompaniment of eighth notes, with a prominent D-flat in the bass line. A tempo marking 'dim. ma in tempo' is written above the right hand. A rehearsal mark '(79) 25' is placed at the end of the first system. The second system continues the same musical texture, showing further development of the melodic and accompaniment lines.

Ex. 8B. Sonata Op. 5, IV. Finale: Allegro moderato ma rubato, mm. 88-99
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

The most intentionally transparent instrumental textures that can be found in the piano sonatas are those that involve the timpani. In the Sonata Op. 5 there are overt

references to the timpani in the fourth movement, which is supported by representations of the timpani in the arrangements. As shown in Example 9, the timpani-like sounds are represented by the repeated triplets and tremolo effects in the bass.



Ex. 9. Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, IV. Intermezzo: Rückblick, mm. 1-4
Peters Edition (1910)

Hardly any literature exists exploring the presence of idiomatic instrumental techniques in the piano repertoire; however, Detlef Kraus, a performer and researcher, has attempted to shed light on this area in his paper: “Streicherklang und –technik im Klaviersatz.”⁷² (“String Sound and Technique at the Piano”) Kraus points to a passage marked “Quasi Staccato” in the Sonata Op. 2, shown in Example 10, as evidence of pizzicato writing in the bass line. He justifies the slur over dots as necessary for “resonance.”



Ex. 10. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, I. Allegro ma non troppo, ma energico, mm. 92-95
Schirmer Edition (1918)

⁷² Kraus, “Streicherklang und –technik im Klaviersatz,” 191-198.

Kraus's central argument is that transferring string technique affects registration and perceptions of resonance.⁷³ He shows how melodic lines presented in the upper register of the violin cannot be transcribed to the piano "as is." Differences between the mechanics of each instrument, such as the smoothness of a bow compared to the articulate hammers of the piano, mean that many string techniques are not easily transferred to the piano.⁷⁴ When presenting a sustained line on the piano similar to a long legato bow on the violin, shown in Example 10 above, Brahms adds extra octave doublings to extend the duration of the resonance of treble notes and to "maximize the fullness of tone."⁷⁵

Examples from the arrangements that show differences between the orchestral and piano scores indicate a similar use of stylistic writing to create resonance. Examples 11A and B below, from the Symphony No. 3, show the differences between the violin line, as presented in the orchestral score, and the way it is doubled with extra octaves in the two-piano arrangement. In this example, taken from the opening of the third symphony, Brahms would have been aware that the Violin I and II lines do not provide enough resonance if played only in the treble range of the first piano part. Given that the melodic material is played by the two largest sections of the orchestra together, single notes on the piano are not enough to be able to compete against the thick accompaniment played by the second pianist. Brahms fills out the resonance by adding an extra octave to the melodic line of the left hand in the piano score, which is played in a lower register.

⁷³ Kraus, "Streicherklang und -technik im Klaviersatz von Brahms," 191-198.

⁷⁴ Kraus, "Streicherklang und -technik im Klaviersatz," 191-198.

⁷⁵ Pascall, "Einleitung," P.XIX-XX

Allegro con brio (Veröffentlicht 1884)

The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes the woodwinds, brass, and percussion. The second system includes the strings.

Woodwinds: 2 Flöten (Flutes), 2 Oboen (Oboes), 2 Klarinetten in B (Clarinets in B), 2 Fagotte (Bassoons), Kontrafagott (Contrabassoon).

Brass: 4 Hörner (Horns) in C¹ and F³, 1 Trompeten in F (Trumpet in F), 3 Posaunen (Trombones).

Percussion: Pauken in F, C (Kettenspieler) (Cymbals in F, C).

Strings: 1. Violine (First Violin), 2. Violine (Second Violin), Bratsche (Viola), Violoncell (Cello), Kontrabaß (Double Bass).

The score begins with a key signature of one flat (F major) and a tempo of **Allegro con brio**. The first measure of the woodwinds and brass is marked **f** (forte). The strings enter in the second measure with a **f** dynamic. The first violin and second violin parts are marked **f** *passionato* (passionately). The viola, cello, and double bass parts are marked **f**.

Ex. 11A. Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90, I. Allegro con Brio, mm.1-6
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

Dritte Symphonie.

Johannes Brahms, Op. 90.

Allegro con brio.

Viol.

Pianoforte I.

Allegro con brio.

Bläser.

Pianoforte II.

Ex 11B. Symphony No. 3 in F major Arranged for two pianos, Op. 90, I. Allegro con brio, mm. 1-8
Simrock Edition (1884)

Many passages such as those shown above in Example 11 can help to pinpoint similar orchestral expressions in the piano sonatas. In a passage from the virtuosic Sonata Op. 2, shown in Example 12, the right hand two-note slurs in Measures 3-6 exemplify idiomatic violin writing by implicating the bowings a violinist would use. On the violin, the repeated C-sharp would be a note stopped with the finger, which would be traded off with the other ascending line over string crossings.

Allegro non troppo ma energico (♩ = 104)

Ex. 12. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, I. Allegro non troppo, ma energico, mm.1-6
Schirmer Edition (1918)

Other string techniques that are modified in the piano arrangements are repetitions and tremolos. By using the fast recall and bounce of the bow, string instruments can repeat notes more quickly and clearly than can be done successfully at the piano. In Measure 52 from Example 13A, taken from the fourth movement of the Symphony No. 3, the violins and violas begin a quick, *leggero* repeated-note pattern. This effect is much more atmospheric on stringed instruments than it is on the piano. In fact, these notes would sound more articulated on the contemporary weighted mechanisms of the modern piano due to the technique needed to play repeated notes quickly. Brahms modified this passage in the arrangement, Example 13B, to be more idiomatic by breaking the triplet pattern over an octave in the second piano part. This allowed for quick repetition while disguising the articulation of each note via a quick rotation of the hand.

C

(Ex. 13A, continued on next page)

54

55

Fl.

Ob.

Klar. (B)

Fag.

K.-Fag.

(C)

Hr.

(F)

Trpt. (F)

Pos.

Pk.

1 Viol.

2 Viol.

Br.

Vcl.

K.-B.

f legg.

pizz.

mf

Ex. 13A. Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90, IV. Allegro, mm. 46-61
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

Ex. 13B. Symphony No. 3 in F Major Arranged for Two Pianos, Op. 90, IV. Allegro, mm. 50-61
Simrock Edition (1884)

In the Sonata Op. 5, Example 14, a chorale-like melody emerges, begging a comparison to woodwind textures. Breathing points in the phrases and intricacies of notation involving slurs and rests indicate “wind-like” textures and therefore become

important identifiers for determining woodwind textures. Julius Harrison describes how the wind section is typically used in Brahms' Symphonies as a section that "sings."

"By itself the Wood-wind [sic] is used largely in what can best be described as choral style (for it suggests singing); i.e., there are doublings of the melody and harmony in two and sometimes more octaves... This effect is common to all Brahms's [sic] orchestral works."

The chorale-like writing in the Piano Sonata Op. 5 implies the same writing style that is found for woodwind instruments in his symphonies; a style that is often associated with woodwinds in nineteenth-century symphonies, and especially with Beethoven.⁷⁶



Ex. 14. Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, IV. Allegro moderato ma rubato, mm. 140-166
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

It appears that Brahms must have found that modifying the material to fit on one piano, even with four-hands, was not sufficient to maintain independent lines. In the four-

⁷⁶ Harrison, *Brahms and his Four Symphonies*, 89.

hand arrangements of his symphonies, both those arranged by him and by Robert Keller, many lines are transposed to different registers to avoid cluttered writing on the piano.⁷⁷ After the first symphony, Brahms made a distinct preference for two-piano arrangements. This choice allowed for more lines to coexist in the same register, since there would be double of each, without fear of uncomfortable crossovers or octave displacement.⁷⁸ The interactive demands of his symphonies also contribute to the need for two pianos to preserve a kind of communicative relationship between parts. Brahms' effort to compose the D Minor Sonata for Two Pianos following the solo sonatas is evidence of the need for a larger medium to express his symphonic ideas.

⁷⁷ Robert Keller was an editor for the publishing company Simrock. Keller edited many of Brahms' works and contributed to several arrangements of Brahms' works.

⁷⁸ Pascall, "Einleitung," XIX.

IV. Monumentality

Origins and Definition:

In nineteenth-century Germany, the German people developed a great concern for the preservation of their culture, a trend that pervaded all facets of artistic expression and developed in music as a movement towards grandeur and virtuosity.⁷⁹ This trend manifested in the establishment of physical and symbolic monuments. This aesthetic quality is referred to as monumentality and its relationship to music is documented throughout music journals such as the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. These publications made frequent demands for collections of historical composers' works as monuments to their memory.⁸⁰ Monumentality is a quality inherent to symphonic music; however, it is not entirely exclusive to this genre. Certain textures and emotional qualities that define monumentality can be used to link other instrumental works to a symphonic idea. Identifying the archetypal characteristics of monumentality that are consistent with orchestral works can provide integrity to the notion of the piano sonatas as "veiled symphonies."

The most obvious sensations of monumentality are projected upon the listener through instrumental effects. These effects include "overpowering brass chorales, sparkling string tremolos, triumphant fanfares, [and] glorious thematic returns."⁸¹ Instrumental effects can impart sentiments of nostalgia and love as a reflection of the increased value of cultural knowledge and preservation at the time. Alexander Rehding

⁷⁹ Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 24-25.

⁸⁰ In fact as a result, the first attention to performance practice and consideration to early compositions was made as more collections of Baroque composers' works came into public circulation. (Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 21-25.)

⁸¹ Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 3.

describes monumental expression as “the power of representation, the power to manipulate emotions.”⁸² Therefore, monumental effects are meant to elicit a distinct emotional impact on the listener in order to create intra- and extra-musical associations.

Brahms’ symphonies have an inherently monumental stature due to the way he organizes their larger structure, orchestrates rich harmonies, and utilizes the full mass of the orchestra. Despite their heavy-handed qualities, the symphonies are experienced with an intimate sentiment.⁸³ They integrate the listener into the musical experience by the way that the instruments converse across sections, similar to a chamber music setting.⁸⁴ For instance, a reference to Brahms’ waltzes for piano four-hands appears in the first movement of the Symphony No. 2 (Example 15).

Ex. 15. Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73, I. Allegro non troppo, mm. 54-60
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

⁸² Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 96.

⁸³ This feeling was one of the reasons Wagner criticized Brahms’ Symphonies by describing them as “chamber-music” works.

⁸⁴ Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 269.

The example above shows an intimate waltz melody played by the low strings in Measure 56. This melody is taken from the relatively thin expression of piano four-hands, which favors the *primo* playing the melody line and the *secondo* playing counter-melody/accompanimental material. This theme is made monumental by the way it is presented in such a lush setting, in the low strings of the orchestra, in comparison to its relatively thin origins.

One of the most attractive qualities of monumental music is its immediacy. It does not require any prior reflection or education in theoretical knowledge to be understood. This is a contrast to the music that came before, which depended on the listener's musical knowledge.⁸⁵

“More often than not, the musical effects we commonly associate with monumentality are achieved less by rhetorical finesse or compositional intricacy than by a combination of straightforward musical content and sheer overwhelming sonic force.”⁸⁶

Brahms' compositional style contains complex inner workings; however, the symphonies project simplicity on their exterior due to the simple structure of the melodic fragments that create the themes for these works.

The highest form of flattery for a composer is to quote or reference another composer's music in their own. In the eighteenth-century, and into the beginning of the nineteenth, it was customary to compose a set of variations on a theme by another famous composer. In the nineteenth-century, the demand for and production of collected editions

⁸⁵ Perhaps the best example of this comes from the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart, which contain “musical jokes.” These jokes are expressed by sudden harmonies or dynamic changes that depend on the experience of the listener to recognize “wrong” notes in a progression. This is not to say that nineteenth-century romantic music was not intellectual, in fact the compositional techniques reflected much more integral manipulation of material by the composer; however, complicated writing was used more for the purpose of creating textures to elicit an emotional response.

⁸⁶ Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 4.

of dead composers' *oeuvres* made music from earlier periods accessible to a much wider public. Thus, these collected works served as monuments to their careers. Having access to collected editions allows composers to learn more about past styles and therefore subliminally incorporate more historical references in their writing. Composers put monumental expression in a work by alluding to a past style; undoubtedly the most popular composer to commemorate at the time was Beethoven.⁸⁷ Brahms himself contributed to building these musical monuments by becoming an editor, most notably for the collected editions of Schubert's works.

Monumental Effects in the Piano Sonatas

Each of the elements described above does not exclusively define monumentality; it is rather the combination of these elements. The piano sonatas appear monumental due to their conception as large-form cyclical works, accessible themes, allusion to symphonic writing, and emotional impact. In the piano sonatas, each melodic voice "dovetails" with the next and they interact contrapuntally on the vertical spectrum. This is similar to the way that instruments interact in the symphonies. This interplay is shown in an example from the Sonata Op. 2 second movement, Example 20, where the distinct registers exchange both melodic and counter-melodic material. This example will be explored later in this text. There are several textures in the sonatas that are specific to symphonic-monumental writing including chorale writing, sheer force, and instrumental effects. Furthermore, contrapuntal writing and allusions to Beethoven pervade these works, providing further historical allusions.

⁸⁷ Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 54-55.

Brahms alludes to Beethoven in the first theme of the Sonata Op. 1, which recalls the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, and again in the fourth movement of the Sonata Op. 2, which recalls the improvisatory introduction and mood of the “Pathétique” Sonata. Furthermore, the opening measures of the Sonata Op. 5, which span six out of the eight octaves of the piano, display how the monumentality of this work is established by the opening statement (Example 16). The first theme is further augmented through developing variation to reach its apotheosis, in the most monumental expression of the movement, at the close of the movement.



Ex. 16. Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, mm. 1-4, mm. 214-222
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

There are many impressive moments in the sonatas, such as the striking openings of each first movement. However, monumentality has many facets of expression that are not exclusively related to majestic writing. These facets of expression may create a “large” emotional impact, so to speak, without the use of large sounds. Sublime effects can also be equally effective. An intimate moment in the Symphony No. 1 belies Brahms’

own personal feelings for Clara Schumann.⁸⁸ In the passage shown in Example 17 below, the strings begin a shimmering *tremolando* in Measure 31. Simultaneously, the solo horn enters mimicking the alphorn, calling as if from far away.⁸⁹

49

The musical score is for a full orchestra, including Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in B-flat (Klar. (B)), Bassoon (Fag.), Contrabassoon (K. Fag.), Horn in C (Hr. (C)), Horn in D-flat (Hr. (B)), Trumpet in C (Trpt. (C)), Trombone (Pos.), and Piano (Pk.). The tempo is marked 'Più Andante'. The score shows a crescendo in measures 27-30, followed by a change in measure 31 where the strings begin a shimmering tremolando and the solo horn enters mimicking the alphorn. The score includes various dynamics such as *p*, *cresc.*, *dim.*, *f*, and *pp*, and articulation marks like *staccato* and *sempre e passionato*.

(Ex. 17 Continued on next page)

⁸⁸ Brahms first sent the theme for this passage in a letter to Clara Schumann, dated 12 September 1868, with the words of a greeting set to the music. (Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, 368.)

⁸⁹ Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 14.

The musical score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (B) (Klar. (B)), Bassoon (Fag.), Horn (C) (Hr. (C)), Horn (B) (Hr. (B)), Trumpet (C) (Tpt. (C)), Trombone (Pos.), Percussion (Pec.), and Piano (Pk.). The score is in 2/4 time and features a variety of dynamics including *pp*, *f*, and *pp dolces*. The tempo is marked *f sempre e passionato*. The score is for measures 27-40 of the fourth movement of the first symphony by Brahms.

Ex. 17. Symphony No. 1, IV. Adagio—Allegro non troppo, ma con brio, mm. 27-40
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

The texture created by these instruments in combination creates a nostalgic feeling. This section correlates to the trio section from the third movement “Scherzo” of the Piano Sonata Op. 2, shown in Example 18. The writing implies horns in the use of

paired voices playing in sequence, which is supported by an implied texture of *tremolando* strings in the tonic-dominant harmonies prolonged ethereally in the pedal.



Ex. 18. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, III. Scherzo, mm. 22-25
Schirmer Edition (1918)

The piano sonatas all contain intimate moments to counteract their extreme virtuosity. The Andante of the Sonata Op. 5 is in and of itself a sublime movement, taking its inspiration from a poetic text about two lovers meeting under the moonlight. At the opening of the movement, Brahms mirrors the text “Der Abend dämmert, der Mondlich scheint” in the descending thirds of the melody. At the most sublime textural and dynamic moment of this movement, the *Andante Molto*, Brahms marks *ppp*, *una corda*, and *col pedale*, thinning out the texture to a ghost of its previous expression. Then, a pedal point begins in the bass—articulated to imply the timpani. This produces a transcendent texture that precedes the climax of the movement. Later in the fourth movement, the first theme of the two lovers takes a more ominous turn. This theme is developed further in the movement when the timpani reappears, to mark each entry of the melodic line.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Due to the way that Brahms writes the repeated triplets—as *portato* thirty-second notes—on dominant to tonic harmonies, there is no doubt that these must represent the timpani in both their textural and harmonic contexts. Additionally, the way that a modification of this figuration is then presented as a quintuplet tremolo spread out over an octave, much like other tremolando representations in the orchestral piano transcriptions, further supports this equation.

Some monumental effects, such as those that are directly related to a symphonic idea, can have a profound emotional impact when presented in a piano sonata. The chorale texture referred to earlier in the discussion of woodwind techniques is one such effect (P. 44). In the Finale of the Sonata Op. 5, a theme begins from far away, sounding like a chorale of winds, and then becomes an overwhelming force of the movement (Example 19). Eventually, this theme moves closer to the forefront and dominates the musical texture until the movement's conclusion. This is one of the most obvious manifestations of monumentality in the piano sonatas.



Ex. 19 Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, IV. Finale, mm. 140-166
Breitkopf & Härtel Edition (1926)

Monumental effects in piano music are not discussed at length in the literature; however Liszt's operatic transcriptions and the use of "three-handed" and "four-handed" techniques provide a connection to symphonic writing.⁹¹ These techniques suggest

⁹¹ Three or four-handed technique refers to a practice, devised by Thalberg, where the composer gives the impression that more hands are playing the piano than just two in the way that the textures are layered. (Rehding *Music and Monumentality*, 87-88.)

several different registers maintaining independence from one another. It is not surprising that this style of writing was deployed in the piano sonatas, especially when Brahms uses two pianists in his orchestral arrangements. In fact, the chorale melody shown above in Example 19 also displays a type of three-handed technique: grace-note octaves in the bass (Measures 148 and 150) create a third layer of sound in addition to the legato chords of each hand.

Furthermore, evidence of three-handed and four-handed techniques are exemplified by the use of three or more staves in music scored for one pianist. Examples can be found in the Sonata Op. 2 second movement “Andante con espressione” (Example 20). By using three-stave writing Brahms delineates different registers and provides the space to give individual markings to each. Maintaining the independence of each line gives the impression of a dialogue between three registers, or four hands.

Ex. 20. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, II. Andante con espressione, mm. 46-53
Schirmer Edition (1918)

Brahms was no stranger to the use of quotation, whether intentionally or not. It has been noted by Brahms' contemporaries and many subsequent musicians how a particular theme from the first movement of the Symphony No.1 resembles the *Freudenthema* from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. In response to these observations, Brahms is documented to have said, "Quite so—even more remarkable that every ass hears as much."⁹² By alluding to Beethoven, Brahms further establishes Beethoven as a monument of German musicality, vitality, and nationality.⁹³ As mentioned previously, the theme for the Piano Sonata Op. 1 bears a striking resemblance to the theme of Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata Op. 106. While this is not a symphonic reference, the choice of the "Hammerklavier"—a sonata which pushed the limits of its time in its scope and technical demands—is fitting as a monumental commemoration.

⁹² Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 81.

⁹³ In fact, Beethoven was the composer whose works were most published in different edited collections and editions following his death. Out of the lists of hundreds of thousands of piano four-hand reductions of symphonies being produced in the nineteenth-century, Beethoven's symphonies were the most arranged works for this medium

V. Applications to performance:

With the knowledge of Brahms' orchestral style, traditional paradigms of instrumentation, representations of instrumentation at the piano, and historical knowledge, it is possible to bring a symphonic interpretation to these pieces that seem to lie beyond technical grasp and understanding on the piano. This is not to say that a pianistic interpretation is invalid, but that many of the difficulties presented in these works can be alleviated by making interpretive decisions based on instrumentation and symphonic resonance. Striving towards a symphonic sound in this way can also help to bring these works closer to a performance that more closely resembles Schumann's first impression. Having studied and performed several of the piano sonatas and orchestral arrangements myself, I have identified several elements that can be used to demonstrate the value of symphonic interpretation. These are resonance, lengths of notes, balance, rubato, and pedaling. Each will be explored here to demonstrate how they can be used to construct a symphonic reading of the sonatas.

Resonance

Resonance refers to the depth and distance of sounds in performance; it is important to consider because that the piano and orchestra experience different resonances in performance. The orchestra inevitably has a physically larger resonance due to its size, the number and variety of musicians playing at once, and the sense of depth resultant from the instrument groups being farther apart in the space.⁹⁴ Many

⁹⁴ By depth I am referring to sonic distance. Some instruments are farther away from the audience than others in orchestral performance, which can be used to create effects of remoteness, as if an instrument is playing alone off in the distance. Additionally, proximity of instruments can also be used to create the effect of intimacy.

composers have taken advantage of this physical distance in performance to create monumental effects, such as the horn calls in the Symphony No. 1 discussed earlier. The piano has often been considered an equal rival of the orchestra, leading to the antagonistic role it frequently plays in many romantic piano concerti. However, the piano is a homogenized instrument and lacks the physical distance of sound between melodic lines that an orchestra experiences. It has to create a different sense of distance in performance—one that is determined by dynamic contrast and tone.

Brahms uses the orchestra in a different way than his contemporaries, opting for a relationship to chamber music on a grand scale. This chamber music relationship finds its most successful expression in the two piano arrangements and can be applied in the solo sonatas as well. One of the most defining features of chamber music is a conversational aspect between the voices. This is an element that relates directly to distance in the way that two instruments that are physically far apart and different in timbre will be able to interact as more independent entities.

In some ways, the modern piano is a flawed medium for the expression of Brahms' music because it is built to sustain even tone and color across all registers. The extreme sound consistency on these instruments disguises independent lines and blends sounds together. However, Brahms' piano and many of the other instruments with which he was regularly in contact were of a distinctly earlier design than contemporary instruments. The piano most commonly associated with Brahms is an 1868 Streicher instrument, given to him as a gift by the company in 1872.⁹⁵ This was the instrument that resided in Brahms' apartment until the end of his life. It was straight-strung, had an incomplete frame and was more subdued in tone; as a result, it would have been

⁹⁵ Bozarth, "The Pianos of Johannes Brahms," 73.

considered conservative like the instruments being produced at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹⁶ There is mention of another piano associated with Brahms--an 1856 Conrad Graf piano of only six and a half octaves once belonging to Clara and Robert Schumann, only becoming Brahms' after Robert Schumann's death.^{97 98}

Brahms was of modest means and his sustained ownership of the 1868 Streicher piano might well be a reflection of his financial status, and not personal preference. Regardless of his financial status, the fact that he composed exclusively on conservative instruments would unquestionably have had an effect on his compositions. Earlier instrument styles had dramatic differences in resonance. Typically, earlier pianos had incomplete frames and were straight-strung. This manner of construction allowed for clear registral changes from low, to middle, and high without the interference of sympathetic vibrations. Due to the incomplete frames, resonance would have a shorter lifespan and the tone of these instruments has often been described as "woodwind-like."⁹⁹ In contemporary performance, one's knowledge of earlier instruments can play a role in the interpretation. Because the registers sound more distinct on these instruments, the voices have more space to be expressed individually. Tone depth would also be thinner and more varied, whereas the consistent tone of the modern instrument thickly disguises the differences between low and high.

In order to achieve effects that resemble those of earlier instruments, the modern pianist should play with more clarity than is generally the accepted standard, reserving full pedal for more resonant *Tutti* effects. This can be done in two ways: by refraining

⁹⁶ Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," 155.

⁹⁷ Bozarth, "The Pianos of Johannes Brahms," 73.

⁹⁸ This would have been the instrument that Brahms first performed for Schumann on.

⁹⁹ Cai. "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," 153-167.

from full pedal and instead experimenting with half pedal or less, and by instituting more control over articulations. Sections such as Example 18 showing three-handed technique, Pg. 53 of the previous chapter, can benefit from minimal pedal. The danger in sections such as this is that the bass voice will be lost if the pedal is too thin. However, since the bass notes resonate longer on contemporary instruments, it is possible to retain low pitches in thin pedals and clear out the other two registers simultaneously. It is not suggested to solely recreate the sound of an earlier instrument on contemporary mediums, and this should not be the performance aim of the sonatas. Instead, mimicking the variety of tone depth and distance found in both orchestral performances and early keyboard instruments can significantly enhance performances of the sonatas. This is done by creating distinct sound colours for each register to diversify sounds.

Articulations

Resonance leads to the next facet of interpretation, one which springs forth from ideas about depth and distance in performance. Given the many ways that different instruments articulate notes, it is the variety of possible articulations available in an orchestral setting that makes it a unique force of expression. Here articulations will be considered as tools to enhance independent voice expression in the piano sonatas. Establishing the kind of technical command to distinguish each voice with a different touch contributes to a more convincing symphonic interpretation.

Pianists spend the majority of their time focusing on how to approach a note, i.e. how to prepare and touch the key, with what force, and how quickly. However, they give much less consideration to its end. This is in part due to the natural decay and dampening

mechanism of the modern instrument. The same is not true for other instruments such as woodwinds and strings. For these instruments, the ends of notes receive an equal amount of care. Although it may not be idiomatic to piano technique, pianists can still do much to manipulate the length of a note by controlling the release, much in the way that harpsichordists and organists do as an intrinsic part of their technique. A variety of “staccato” sounds can be created by manipulating both the beginnings and ends of notes, with and without varying degrees of pedal. In support of orchestral interpretation, articulation choices should be made based on the desired instrumental sounds such as brushed string strokes, *detaché*, tonguing by wind instruments, or *pizzicatos*, to name a few.

There are several different techniques that can be used to execute the different instrumental sounds found in the piano sonatas. For timpani sounds, it is preferable to use a weighted arm staccato with a slow attack to make the note blossom after the attack. In combination with a controlled release, this will imitate the deep resonance of the timpani and the controlled dampening of resonance after-words. For the sound of articulated woodwinds, a controlled attack from the key with the resonance of the pedal can imitate the sound of tonguing. To create a string *pizzicato* sound, the key should be struck quickly with a sharp attack. For the release of a *pizzicato* sound some resonance must be maintained and tapered off either with the pedal catching the resonance, or with the fingers, rather than a dry cutoff. Despite the fact that *pizzicatos* are shorter notes, there is a particular resonance created on string instruments when they play with this technique. *Pizzicato* imitation should therefore not be dry, but rather retain shallow resonance in the pedal after the initial articulation. For an orchestral *tutti* staccato the release should be

controlled to create a staccato articulation while allowing the pitches to resonate slower and longer. This creates the space in which each pitch can be heard operating as a part of an independent line. The fifth movement of the Sonata Op. 5 is largely based on a staccato motive and provides numerous instances to explore varieties of attacks. In Example 20, the chords at the opening of this movement require the kind of orchestral *tutti* staccato treatment described above.



Ex. 20. Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, V. Finale, mm.1-5
Peters Edition (1910)

A dry pianistic attack is undesirable in this passage because the harsh pointed sound would disguise the intricate voicing of each chord. Instead, a controlled release here extends the pitch resonance, while maintaining the crispness of each reiteration. Additionally, to highlight registral differences in this passage and create more contrast between the expression of each phrase, the first fragment (Measure 1-2) should emphasize the deep resonance of the dominant harmony, while the second fragment (Measure 3-4) should phrase towards the thinner tonic harmony. For the second fragment, I would also recommend bright voicing of the very top lines because these notes decay fastest. This will further emphasize the difference between top and bottom registers.

In contrast to the *tutti* staccato found at the opening of the movement, other passages require different instrumental articulations. Further on in the same movement, different markings imply different varieties of articulations. Here in Example 21, the

rolled left hand chords are imitating pizzicato while the upper line is representative of violinistic writing.



Ex. 21. Sonata No. 3, Op. 5, V. Finale, mm. 293-297
Peters Edition (1910)

Brahms' notation of rolled chords in the bass here serves several purposes: highlighting of independent lines, allowing access to out of reach notes, and additional resonance—all of which correlate to his use of rolled chords in orchestral arrangements. In an orchestral setting, pizzicato has a two-part sound: the initial plucking noise, and lingering resonance. This often gives the impression in a symphony concert hall setting of the pitches resonating at different times, with some lower pitches speaking later, causing the pitches to seem slightly off-set. Short rolled chords on the piano mimic this aspect of pizzicato writing.

Balance/Voicing

In typical contemporary performances of Brahms' piano works, pianists favor a "rich" and "full" sounding interpretation. Much of the fullness we associate with Brahms' music is built into the texture and suffers from the addition of extraneous pedal or non-specific voicing. In fact, because of Brahms' attention to contrapuntal line and careful composition of accompaniment and bass lines, many of Brahms' works beg for clarity

and control over homogeneity. A new approach would be to use what we know about Brahms' earlier instruments and orchestral style to cleanse our interpretation.

Schumann evaluated Brahms' playing style as exemplifying the colors and characteristics of orchestral writing in the "Neue Bahnen." He felt strongly that Brahms' personal performance of the piano sonatas was linked to their successful reception and wrote of this in a letter to the publisher Dr. Härtel.

"His playing belongs essentially to his music. I do not remember to have heard such original tone effects before."¹⁰⁰

The critic Eduard Hanslick also remarked on Brahms' individual pianistic technique, further adding to the commentary on Brahms' style in an 1862 review.

"Brahms's piano playing is all of a piece with his artistic individuality in general. He is motivated solely by the desire to serve the composition, and he avoids, almost to the point of shyness, any semblance or suggestion of independent importance. He has a highly developed technique which lacks only the ultimate brilliant polish, the final muscular self-confidence required of the virtuoso. He treats the purely technical aspect of playing with a kind of negligence. He has a way, for instance, of shaking octave passages from a relaxed wrist in such a way that the keys are brushed sideways rather than struck squarely from above."¹⁰¹

Based on these assessments, it is safe to assume that Brahms' playing would fully use the capabilities of the conservative instruments in his vicinity. Certainly, balance would be a different experience on these instruments. On contemporary pianos, the decay is longer than on earlier instruments. When performing these works on modern pianos, balance depends on the register in which the melodic material is presented, and should maintain the clarity of the bass line in opposition. This means that a pianistic top-heavy voicing should not be the default, and that thickly written bass lines as well as

¹⁰⁰ May, *Life of Johannes Brahms Vol.I*, 135.

¹⁰¹ Hanslick. *Music Criticisms*, 84-85.

accompanimental figures must participate with the melodic line rather than becoming merely textural.



Ex. 22. Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, V. Finale, mm. 24-31
Peters Edition (1910)

In the last movement of the Sonata Op. 5, Example 22, the sixteenth-note passagework resembles violin writing. The stepwise moving upper notes of the sixteenth-note line might be played on the violin by a single shifting finger, and the slurs would represent the bowings. The octaves in the bass serve as a sustaining resonance for the high sixteenth-notes and should be played with deep tone to provide support for the upper line in the less resonant part of the instrument. In this way, both the “sections” of the orchestra, represented in each hand, receive equal balance in opposition to one another. As was explained earlier, Brahms emphasized his preference for thick and equal accompaniment with his composition student Gustav Jenner. This explains cases of doubled octave bass lines and thick accompaniments in the piano sonatas.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Jenner, “Brahms as Man, Teacher and Artist,” 403.



Ex. 23. Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, I. Allegro maestoso, mm. 88-100
Breitkopf and Härtel (1926)

In the example above, Example 23, a singing cello line, much like the one that begins the third movement of the Symphony No. 3, must be kept sustained and legato against the articulated syncopations of wind-like sounds in the right hand. To successfully maintain balance, the melody must be played with a full tone sustained by rolled bass notes in the pedal. The articulated voices on top are reminiscent of winds and should be played in a very controlled manner with the fingers.

In the Sonata Op. 2, there are many examples of thickly layered voices that require decisive choices in balance and voicing. The second movement has been referenced several times previously because of it demonstrates three-handed technique: a decidedly symphonic device. Further on in the movement, overlapping voices continuously enter on top of each other and create thickly concentrated textures, as shown in Example 24.

Ex. 24. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, II. Andante con expression, mm. 46-53
Schirmer Edition (1918)

In heavily layered sections such as these, voice-leading becomes an important factor for determining proper voicing. In the beginning of this passage, it is important to voice towards the three note pick-ups of each voice entry to draw attention to the beginnings of each line. In the second line it is important to sustain the B-flat in the bass. However, the complex layering begins to become overwhelming as more and more voices are added. In this case, it is extremely important to voice towards the upper voice in each individual register to make sure that the continuity of each line is heard. Additionally, the sustained pedal B-flats in the bass should be struck slowly and from the key to assure that the sound will blossom after the initial attack.

Rubato

Throughout history, rubato has been one of the greatest expressive tools available to pianists. Brahms is even remembered as having preferred a free manner of playing.¹⁰³ There is a single recording of Brahms playing Hungarian Dance No.1 arranged for solo piano on a wax cylinder and this performance is one piece of evidence for his preference for flexibility. Others have described this flexibility as a distinct quality of Brahms' playing, such as Schumann in "Neue Bahnen" and Gustav Jenner in his memoirs of studying with Brahms. More flexibility was acceptable in piano playing around the turn of the century than is considered standard practice today.¹⁰⁴ Pianists can more easily manipulate time on a wide scale, often changing tempi suddenly and often, while orchestras require more subtlety, varying their rubato on a large note structure by sections and themes rather than by smaller subdivisions. However, Hans von Bülow, one of the prominent conductors of Brahms' music in his lifetime, was described in 1884 as conducting the orchestra with the "freedom of a solo pianist."¹⁰⁵

Having exploring the Sonata No. 3 and Symphony No. 3 transcribed for two pianos side by side, I have discovered many interesting correlations between symphonic performances of both these works. In many typical performances of the Third Symphony, especially by orchestras known for their Brahms interpretations such as the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, modified tempi from section to section and theme to theme is very common. I approached the two-piano reductions with this kind of interpretation in

¹⁰³ Musgrave, *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style*, 2-5.

¹⁰⁴ Finson, "Performing Practice in the Late Nineteenth Century," 471.

This claim is also backed up by many recordings from the turn of the century, when recording was a novelty that all famous composers and pianists wanted to be a part of. While early recording styles were not refined enough to preserve intricate details like dynamics and colour shadings, they can at least show us tempi and overall rubato practices.

¹⁰⁵ Frisch, *Brahms the Four Symphonies*, 167.

mind, expecting to be able to use a unique type of rubato. However, these tempi changes and variations from section to sections were not as successfully executed at the piano.

This discrepancy in interpretation can be attributed to several factors. First, that the performance traditions of the Vienna Philharmonic more closely resemble those of early twentieth-century performance practice, and that contemporary North American performance practice favors a strict adherence to tempi in performance. Second, the piano and the orchestra have highly contrasting resonances; decay on a piano is different than the decay of one hundred musicians playing together in a resonant space, and invariably this transference from orchestra to the more intimate medium of piano loses certain interactions within the space. Third, key structural changes in the symphonies usually correlate with sudden changes in instrumentation and color, which require different kinds of acoustic timing. In contrast, the combined timbre of two pianos playing together is very homogenous and does not require such timing.

One example that highlights discrepancies in timing occurs at the second theme from the first movement of Symphony No. 3, Example 25. In this excerpt, Piano I plays the melody, which is originally played by the Violin I section, alone with her right hand. Piano I is accompanied by the rest of the orchestra, which is played by Piano II with both hands. In common orchestral performances, this violin melody is taken at a significantly slower tempo than the sections directly preceding and succeeding it. This lingering tempo is unsuccessful at the piano because the melody is less sustained on the piano than in a violin section performance. Whereas the violin section can create a perfectly sustained sound and shaping with the bow, the sound on the piano, unsupported by the bass, decays too quickly to successfully take a slower tempo and keep the melody connected.

Ex. 25. Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90, I. Allegro con brio, mm. 46-48
Simrock Edition (1884)

Rubato can and should be used in the piano sonatas; however, a pianist's flexibility will not hold together where structure and rhythmic texturing are important to understanding these works. It would be rare to hear an orchestra take time for metric variations, hemiolas, or cross-rhythms, yet this is a frequent occurrence in piano performance. Brahms' innate integration of developing variation, a present element in both piano and orchestral works, depends on metric variation as a crucial element for changing the presentation of a melodic line.¹⁰⁶ To preserve the orchestral writing style in the piano sonatas, rubato must be treated on a larger scale as a part of the structure. Themes may take on subtle changes in tempo according to the mood of the material; however, rubato that interrupts long phrases should be avoided.

The opening of the Sonata Op. 2 (Example 26) presents a perfect example of thematic variation, which was discussed previously as an important element of symphonic writing. It is tempting here to use rubato to express the extroverted energy of

¹⁰⁶ Metric variation refers to a type of tempo rubato expressed by the composer, rather than the performer. By adjusting sub-divisions to smaller and smaller intervals, or the reverse, the composer writes out *accelerandos* and *ritardandos*. This technique leaves the composer in control of the pace, and the performer to take a more passive approach.

the opening motive, but rubato would interfere with the metric *ritardando* that Brahms had already written out in the subdivisions. Passages such as these require a more subtle treatment of time, one in which rubato is confined to the limits of each beat. In order to achieve subtle rubato, pianists should first prepare this passage diligent to the metronome pulse; beats should not be accented, and changes in subdivision should be sudden.

Ex. 26. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, I. Allegro non troppo ma energico, mm. 7-17
Peters Edition (1910)

Lastly, there is an additional type of rubato that is generally ignored by contemporary pianists: hand separation, or anticipatory left hand entry. This rubato is a typical late nineteenth-century performance practice, and continued to be a predominant feature of the early twentieth century, as was shown by the earliest piano recordings from the first few decades. Most pianists disregard this rubato as a trait of lazy technique without considering its practical uses and why historical pianists were so fond of it.

Anticipatory left-hand entry can be useful for several reasons: to literally separate the voices, to give the opportunity for the treble to blossom within the bass register's sound, and to create textural clarity. In some ways this technique is already present in Brahms' writing because he often notates anticipatory bass notes using grace note figuration and three-stave writing. While these anticipations are necessary to achieve access to three registers of the piano at once, its frequency as a notated technique in Brahms' music makes it the evidence of a young composer's attempt to incorporate the practices going on around him.

Pedaling

Line independence has been identified as an important part of the symphonic conversation due to its overarching presence in both the piano and orchestral works. Because of this, Brahms' music does not deserve the muddy treatment it often gets. While the modern instrument makes clarity more difficult because of its cross-stringing and long-lasting resonance, attention to more subtle pedalling can provide both clarity and resonance simultaneously. It is important to consider that while orchestras cannot pedal, orchestral textures can create many similar atmospheric effects. Most importantly, the pedal must be treated as a tool for enhancing the clarity of individual textures, rather than as one that binds them together. One passage that demands independent articulation while needing sustain of the pedal is found in Example 27 from the Sonata Op. 2 Movement 1.



Ex. 27. Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2, I. Allegro non troppo ma energico, mm. 23-27
Peters Edition (1910)

Here, long bass notes are sustained over the whole bar while contrary articulations implying a pizzicato-like texture are juxtaposed above. To sustain the bass notes while allowing for the articulation of the upper line, the rolled chord must be timed so that it happens ever so slightly before the bass note. Without the interference of the initial right hand chord, the short articulations will be more manageable in a thinner pedal.

Additionally, in another excerpt (Example 28) taken from the opening of the work a *tremolando* figure, which begins in the left hand in Measure 3, creates so much resonance in the instrument that this passage cannot be pedaled, except at the very end, to preserve the articulation of the violinistic slurs in the upper line.



Ex. 28. Sonata No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 2, I. Allegro non troppo ma energico, mm.1-6
Schirmer Edition (1918)

Summary:

Schumann's first review describing the piano sonatas as "*Verschleierte Symphonien*" finds validity in the exploration of Brahms' orchestral works, compositional influences, and contemporary versus earlier performance practices. The symphonic quality and virtuosity of the pianistic writing contained within the piano sonatas is explained by Brahms' orchestral works. Furthermore, their interpretation can be enhanced by incorporating all the nuances discussed herein. While still maintaining their independence as pianistic works, accentuating the characteristics that first made Schumann so inspired by Brahms' genius can bring the piano sonatas closer to being true *Verschleierte Symphonien*.

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Appendix A:

New Paths (1853)

Many years have passed since I have been heard from in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, an arena so rich in memories for me—indeed, almost as many years as I once devoted to editing it—namely, ten. I have often been tempted to speak out, despite strenuous creative activity. A number of important new talents have come along in the meantime, a musical era has appeared to be in the offing, heralded by many rising young artists, even though the latter may be known to a rather small circle. Following their progress with the utmost interest, I felt certain that from such developments would suddenly emerge an individual fated to give expression to the times in the highest and most ideal manner, who would achieve mastery, not step by step, but at once, springing like Minerva fuller armed from the head of Jove. And now here he is, a young fellow at whose cradle graces and heroes stood watch. His name is Johannes Brahms.

He comes from Hamburg, where he had been working in quiet obscurity, initiated by an excellent and inspired teacher into the most difficult canons of the art. He was recommended to me by an eminent and famous master. Even in his external appearance he displays those characteristics which proclaim: here is a man of Destiny! Seated at the piano, he began to disclose the most wondrous regions. It was also most wondrous playing, which made of the piano an orchestra of mourning and jubilant voices. There were sonatas, more like disguised symphonies; songs, whose poetry would be intelligible even to one who didn't know the words, although a profound vocal line flows through them all; a few piano pieces, partly of a demoniac character, charmingly; then sonatas for violin and piano, string quartets, etc.—all so different one from another that each seemed to flow from a separate source. And finally it seemed as though he himself, a surging stream incarnate, swept them all together in a single waterfall, sending aloft a peaceful rainbow above the turbulent waves, flanked on the shores by playful butterflies and the voices of nightingales.

When once he lowers his magic wand over the massed resources of chorus and orchestra, we shall have in store for us wonderful insights into the secret of the spiritual world. May the highest genius lend him strength; and well it may, for in him resides a second genius—namely, that of modesty. His contemporaries greet him as he sets off into a world which may bring him pain, but which will surely bring him laurels and palms as well. We welcome him as a staunch combatant. Every age has a secret society of congenial spirits. Draw the circle tighter, you who belong to one another, that the truth of art may shine ever more clearly, spreading joy and blessings everywhere!

R.S.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Robert Schumann, "New Paths," 200-201.