TEXTURAL AMBIGUITY IN THE PIANO MUSIC OF JOHANNES BRAHMS

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TEXTURAL AMBIGUITY IN THE PIANO MUSIC OF JOHANNES BRAHMS

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This dissertation examines textural ambiguity in the piano music of Johannes Brahms and contextualizes this aspect of his compositional style with discussions of nineteenth-century performance practice, and changes in piano building during Brahms's life. Recent analyses of Brahms's music have emphasized several types of ambiguity encountered, including metrical, harmonic, and formal ambiguity. This dissertation focuses on Brahms's use of textural ambiguity: specifically, his frequent obscuring of thematic lines, obscuring the identity of individual lines in polyphonic works, and fluctuating hierarchies among individual voices. The question of balance and melodic clarity has been a primary concern for scholars concerned with historically-informed performance of Brahms's music. However, many of these scholars have misinterpreted Brahms's piano-writing, and misconstrued historical evidence as to Brahms's preferences regarding instrument. This dissertation proposes new ways of understanding the relationship between Brahms's music and changes in piano building based on analysis of his textures, and a consideration of late-ninteenth-century treatises on performance and composition.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Augustus Arnone holds performance degrees from Cornell University, The University of Michigan, and The Boston Conservatory. Committed to the study of performance practice, Mr. Arnone has performed on period instruments spanning the entire history of the piano. He is also committed to the performance of contemporary music, and has worked with some of the leading composers of the generation. Active also as a scholar and lecturer, he has presented at a number of musicology symposiums on topics in historical performance, and published several articles.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Elizabeth Arnone, and my sisters Olivia and Isabel, whose belief in me has been as constant as the North Star. I'd also like to dedicate it to the memory of my father, who showed me what it is to be special

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank Malcolm Bilson, the teacher I'd always wanted and didn't know I'd find. His influence has been vast and decisive, and emanates from every page of this dissertation. I'd also like to thank the other members of my committee, James Webster and David Rosen, who've made invaluable contributions to my growth as a writer and musician. There are a number of professors who, though not on my committee, have been instrumental in the development of this dissertation. David Yearsley allowed me to turn in a number of versions of a final paper for his Bach seminar, patiently editing each one; I owe much of my writing habits to his help. Styra Avins has been incredibly supportive and helpful, sending me advance copies of her publications and reading and commenting on my work. I'd also like to extend a special and emphatic thanks to my colleagues in the Cornell graduate program, each of whose own individual excellence has been an inspiration and model for my work; this list includes, but is not exclusive to, Emily Dolan, Nick Mathew, Francesca Brittan, Wiebke Thormählen, and Emily Green. Finally several people have made the substantial and lasting contributions that led me to Cornell and to becoming the kind of musician that I am. Penelope Crawford was my introduction to the world of period instruments and performance practice. Jason Eckardt and Marilyn Nonken have opened up another world to me by helping to cultivate my passion for contemporary music. The last person I'd like to thank is Jonathan Bass, my first piano teacher in college: were it not for the excellence of his teaching I might not have overcome an erratic and insufficient training, and perhaps would not have made it to graduate school as a performer.

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Introduction

In Brahms's Ballade in B Minor, Opus 10 no.4, at the entrance of the B section in m. 47. a unique performance direction appears: Col intimissimo sentimento ma senza troppo marcare la melodia — With the most intimate sentiment but without marking out the melody too much.[1] [Figure 1a] This provocative admonition describes the composer's vision for twenty-five measures of haunting pianissimo music. The deeply introspective theme evokes a profound longing and grief, whose intensity is not released in an ardent or violent outburst but remains muted and distant. Brahms's direction to the performer suggests that the poignant melodic line is meant to remain a translucent specter, dimly emanating from behind the delicate sonic veil of the accompaniment.[2]

Aside from the specificity of his performance indications, Brahms has written a piano texture designed in every respect to partially obscure the melodic line. For one thing, the melody is embedded within the accompaniment rather than isolated above it. As indicated by the double stemming, the melodic line remains in the alto within the undulating accompanimental figure, and is covered throughout by an upper voice. Furthermore, the theme is confined to a relatively low tessitura, primarily settled below middle C. The timbre of a piano is mellow and dark in this register as opposed to the more piercing quality of the treble, and therefore

1 This section is also marked *Più lento.* When the section is recapitulated at measure 135, he writes *mezza voce*, which is apparently another way of telling the performer to restrain projection of the theme.

2 The work was composed in 1854, a particularly painful and turbulent year for Brahms because of Robert Schumann's attempted suicide and subsequent removal to an asylum at Endenich. This year also marked Brahms's admission of hopeless love for Clara Schumann in a letter to Joseph Joachim. This letter is published in Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, trans. Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 48.

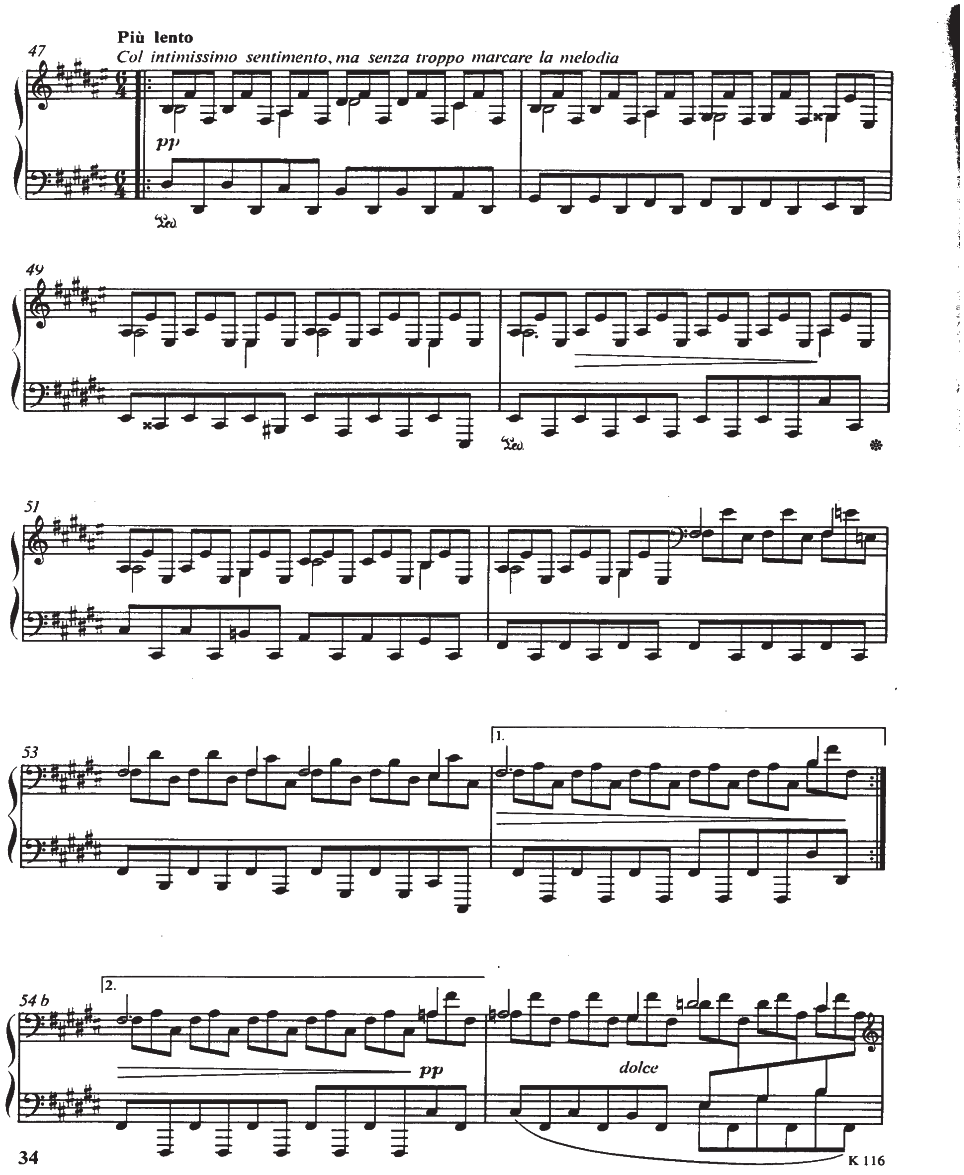

Figure 1a
B minor Ballade Opus 10, no. 4
mm. 47-55

conforms to Brahms's intention that the melody not be overly penetrating. Another effect of the melodic voice's low tessitura is that, because it inhabits the same register as the accompaniment, it is not timbrally distinct from the

rest of the texture. A pianist can counteract this tendency by consciously voicing the melodic notes with their own distinct sound quality, but Brahms's direction indicates that he doesn't want the melody overly separated from the rest of the texture. Finally, the melodic voice is doubled by a lower, primarily parallel, harmonic voice, lending a still darker quality to the melodic timbre.

Another factor that contributes to the veiled quality of the section is the dense saturation of the lower register. On a piano, the fundamental pitches of individual chord members are markedly less distinct in close-positioned chords than widely spaced ones. This effect is far more pronounced in the lower register where increased resonance amplifies the effects of sympathetic vibration. The resulting complex of overtones was considered particularly harsh and dissonant by some of Brahms's contemporaries, who valued textural clarity above all.[3] In this *Ballade*, the dense background of overtones resulting from Brahms's saturation of the lower register creates a kind of sonic fog that interferes with melodic clarity. The combination of all these textural and registral features represents Brahms's conscious use of the acoustic behavior of the piano to obscure the musical surface and minimize a clear delineation of the melodic line.

The shifting hierarchy of voices within this section adds still another layer of ambiguity. In mm. 47-54 the right hand's middle voice, the alto, is the sole thematic voice, enveloped between harmonic tones and supported by a lower parallel voice. In m. 55, however, the left hand's tenor line begins to emerge from its role as parallel harmonic voice and become an independent line of its own. By m. 58 [Figure 1b], as indicated by Brahms's stemming, the tenor line has fully arrived as a stable melodic line and equal member in the

3 The prevailing aesthetic values with regard to textural clarity in piano music among Brahms's contemporaries will be discussed in Chapter 2.

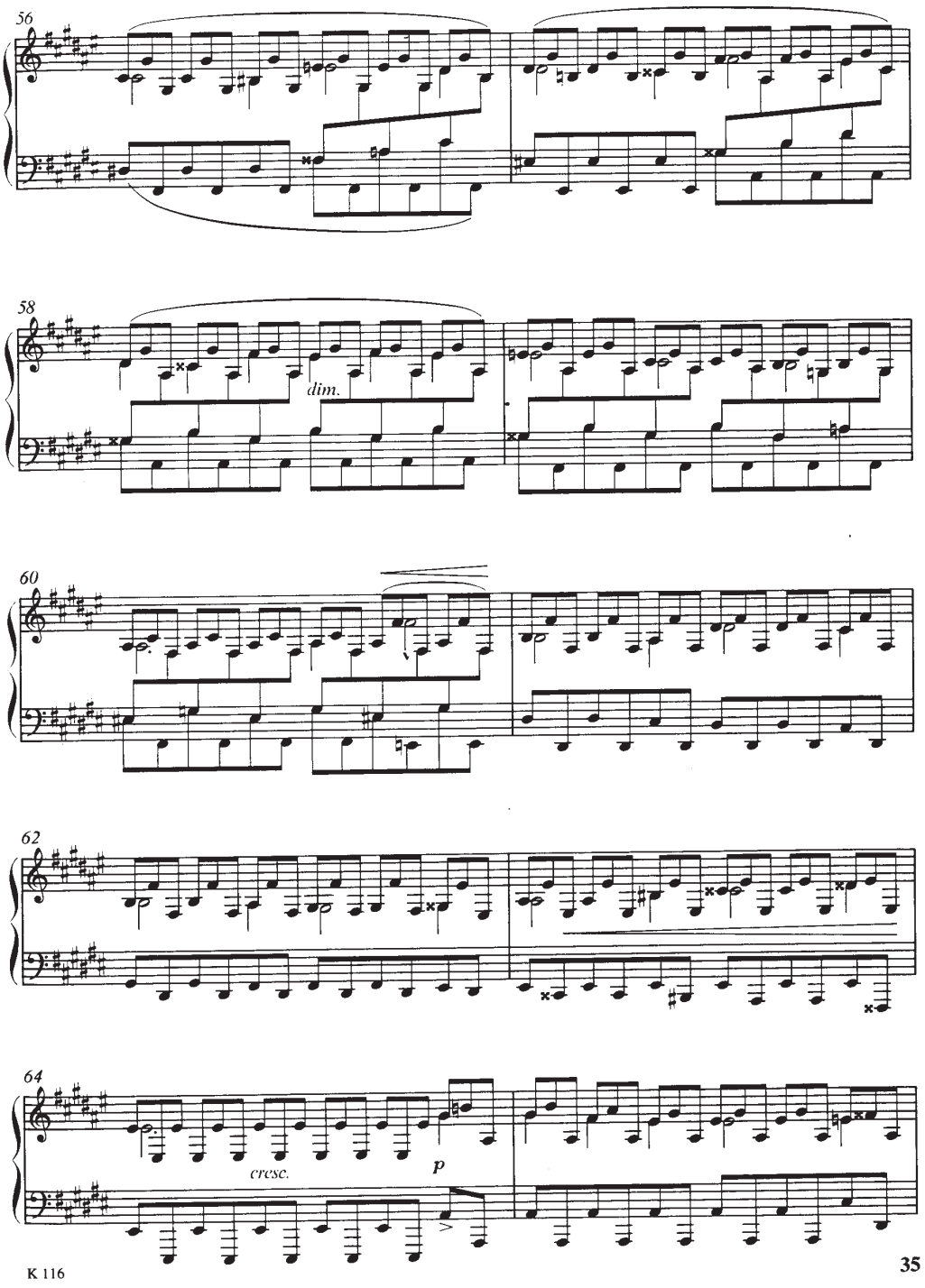

Figure 1b
B minor Ballade, Opus 10, no. 4
mm. 56-65

duet, while in the very next measure the alto recedes somewhat into the harmonic background. The *marcato* marking on the alto's F sharp later in on beat 5 of m. 60 and accompanying hairpin cue the performer to pull this line from the background into which it has receded and reassert it as a thematic voice. The hierarchy and roles of individual voices within this section are dynamic and unpredictable, and the changes in texture fluid and seamless. The ambiguities in voice hierarchy work together with the murkiness of Brahms's piano writing to contribute to the veiled atmosphere of the work.

Donald Francis Tovey, in his essay "Brahms's Chamber Music" has written, ""[f]or pages together Brahms's texture at all periods invites analysis as close as that of a Bach fugue …"[4] Tovey performed often as pianist with Joachim and so had access to much first-hand knowledge of Brahms's aesthetics and intentions. Tovey devotes much of the discussion in this essay to the aesthetics of Brahms's textures. In fact he opens the essay by explaining that Brahms as a composer was less reliant on sketches because the details of the texture were so integral to the composition.

> It is not known how far Brahms sketched in Beethoven's way; that is to say by dashing down, on one stave to a line, the whole course of a composition, leaving harmony, texture, and instrumentation for considerations at final stages, and committing oneself to nothing that cannot be as easily altered as improvised, if need be, in a dozen such sketches, all of which will then retain the spontaneity of improvisation enhanced by every gain of insight. The method is admirably convenient for a style in which texture does not determine any important features, and it is a necessary method in all branches of vocal music where words are to be declaimed with dramatic continuity. But where the texture determines the course of the music, outline-sketching becomes less efficient, and the composer must rely on carrying the flow of the music in his head through all the labour of detail. ... Hence Brahms, whose style was from the outset almost evenly balanced between the

4 Tovey, Donald Francis. "Brahms's Chamber Music." In *Essays and Lectures on Music*, edited by Hubert Foss. London: Oxford University Press, 1949, 265.

> most dramatic sonata form and the highest polyphony, can have effected comparatively little by the practice of outline-sketching. (220-221)

In this thesis I will examine and contextualize details of texture in Brahms's solo piano music. The first chapter will be devoted primarily to analysis, along with discussion of the practical implications for performance. Chapter 2 will focus on performance practice, reviewing pertinent documentary evidence of Brahms's thoughts on performance and comparing it to late-nineteenth-century publications that portray performance attitudes among his contemporaries. I will also review recent Brahms performance practice literature, which has largely been concerned with attempting to understand Brahms's performance intentions through analysis of his textures. The analyses I advance in Chapter 1 along with the comparison of evidence of Brahms's views on performance with those of his contemporaries lead to conclusions that refute prevailing claims in recent literature.

The *lento* section of Brahms's B Minor Ballade typifies a kind of textural ambiguity that is characteristic of many of Brahms's piano works. In chapter 1 I will discuss textural features in other of his piano works that serve to obscure melodic material. One of the primary areas I will focus on is balance. Specifically, I will point to examples demonstrating Brahms's careful use of register and spacing to evoke clarity or obscurity. Attention to Brahms's alternation between bass-oriented and treble-oriented textures reveals the importance of instrumental color in Brahms's piano music. Likewise, awareness of the density of his accompaniments, and the degree to which melodic material is separated from the rest of the texture, is critical to understanding his intentions regarding melodic projection.

Beyond discussing questions of balance, I will show how Brahms creates textural ambiguity through the intricacy of his part-writing. In certain passages, he blurs the distinction between melody and accompaniment by embedding melodic strands within the accompaniment.[5] In others he blurs the separation of individual lines by temporarily uniting formerly separate parts into a single line, only to be separated into individual parts again shortly thereafter.[6] I will also discuss polyphonic textures in Brahms's piano music in which the intricacy of the part-writing places renders the task of identifying individual parts and following the voice-leading extraordinary difficult for both listener and performer. In these cases, even with the score, a multiplicity of interpretations is often possible.

Recognition of these aspects of his style can have significant implications for performance. After all, the question of balance is ultimately in the hands of the performer. A pianist who consciously strives towards textural clarity can thin out Brahms's thickly written accompaniments by consistently underplaying the accompaniment, and by a sparse use of the sustain pedal. However, a pianist who accepts the aesthetic implications of "murky" textures can build up a less differentiated background of sound through the opposite approach; allowing melodic lines to be submerged within the texture and blurring harmonic changes with the pedal. Likewise the separation of individual voices, or lack thereof, is within the control of the performer. Pianists can make it easier for the listener to trace a line's progress by "voicing." (sorting the texture into layers through contrasting dynamic levels or timbres) They also can communicate hierarchy in multi-voiced textures by projecting lines according to their perceived importance. On the other

5 In addition to Op. 10 no. 4 [Figure 1a], see Op. 119 no. 1. [Figure 15]
6 For example Op. 76 no. 6. [Figure 16a]

hand, one can eschew separating voices within a texture, and resist stratifying individual voices into a hierarchical order. This can lead to evocative effects in Brahms's music. Throughout this chapter, I will intersperse within my interpretations of Brahms's piano textures a discussion of their implications for performance

In Chapter 2, I will show how recognizing the aesthetic implications of textural ambiguity in Brahms's piano works provides a framework for a more nuanced understanding of nineteenth-century performance practice. I will begin with a discussion of some late-nineteenth-century treatises that take up the subject of clarity in piano music. These treatises, which seem directed at both performers and composers, give evidence of an important shift in attitudes towards composing for the piano that took place during the course of the nineteenth century. The shift was directly related to changes in piano manufacture during the second half of the century; changes that culminated in more powerful and resonant pianos with the ability to sustain tones for much longer than pianos of the first half of the century. The increased resonance of the later pianos, however, also meant a reduced transparency and clarity of tone, particularly in the lower register. The treatises are devoted to discussing the obstacles to textural clarity presented by the acoustic behavior of the late-nineteenth century piano, and to illustrating ways of writing for the instrument so as to achieve optimal textural clarity; a condition that they equate with the highest aims of music.

According to the criteria for "beautiful" piano sonorities established in these treatises, Brahms's way of writing for the piano was particularly "harsh" and "dissonant." The treatises urge caution against overuse of the piano's lower register and particularly the avoidance of close-positioned chords

and stepwise motion in inner voices. Throughout Chapter 1, I will refer to examples spanning the entirety of Brahms's piano *oeuvre* that utilize precisely the kinds of piano textures these treatises argue against. This demonstrates the uniqueness of Brahms's ideals in piano sonority as compared with those of many of his contemporaries. It also demonstrates that these ideals were formed early in his career as a composer and remained in his piano music even as the piano underwent changes in design and construction.

In recent decades, performance practice scholars studying Brahms's piano music have pointed to the use of close-positioned chords in the lower register and low-lying tenor-range melodies as proof of his supposed allegiance to mid-nineteenth-century pianos that predate the advent of instruments very much like those in use today. During the 1860's, the Steinway company introduced many of the design innovations that distinguish modern instruments from those in use prior to the 1860's, including the use of a complete cast-iron frame, the crossing of the bass strings, and the duplex scale.[7] Because of the commercial success of these pianos and endorsement by prominent concert-artists, many European piano makers began to model their own pianos after the Steinway. Nevertheless, performance practice scholars have insisted that Brahms would never have written for the piano as he did had he expected that the music would be played on modern instruments.

Recently, Styra Avins has argued that such a position is untenable from a historical standpoint, pointing to a number of letters in which Brahms specifically requests a Steinway or Bechstein piano for his own performances.[8] I maintain that such a position is indeed untenable, and I will refer to the use

7 See Chapter 2 for explanations of these design features and their consequences for the piano's sound.

8 Avins, Styra. "Performing Brahms's Music: Clues from His Letters." *In Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performing Style*, ed. Michael Musgrave and Bernard Sherman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.), 11-47.

of modern-type instruments not only by Brahms but by concert artists who were closely associated with him. I will also discuss the problems inherent in dividing late-nineteenth-century pianos into "modern instruments" and "period instruments." This is a distinction that belongs to today's performance culture, in which the use of anything other than a Steinway-type piano belongs to the "historical performance movement," but not to nineteenth-century performance culture, when pianists could expect to play on a wide variety of pianos depending on the venue.

More important, I will argue that performance practice study of Brahms's piano works has been dominated in recent years by a mistaken assumption, namely that textural clarity was his intent. Arguments for the dependence of Brahms's piano ideals on the specific characteristics of mid-century pianos have rested on the assertion that Brahms's piano writing sounds heavy and muddled on modern instruments but clear and defined on earlier pianos. By contrast, my thesis is that the evocative ambiguity of dense and impenetrable textures is an essential aspect of Brahms's piano music, from his earliest works to his last. My experience playing on mid-century pianos has been that the differences between pianos Brahms knew in the 1850's and the pianos he knew in the 1890's were not so substantial as to turn what would otherwise be a clear and transparent texture into a murky one. The fact that he continued to write dense, bottom-oriented textures even into the era of the modern-type piano's domination indicates that he did not view the decreased clarity as a incongruent with his ideals of piano sonority.

Robert Pascall has written "the authenticity movement in musical performance … has advanced up to the middle of the last century, and

authentic performances of Brahms will be with us very soon."[9] The advent of modern instruments before the midpoint of Brahms's career, the persistence of certain aspects of his style despite the changing piano, and the singularity of his piano aesthetics as compared to prevailing tendencies amongst his contemporaries add unique complexities to the pursuit of any historically-informed Brahms performance. The endeavor of reconciling his idiosyncratic style, at once of his time and outside his time, to what we can understand about nineteenth-century pianos and performance practice from our modern vantage-point will lead to ambiguities as perplexing as those contained in the music itself. This thesis attempts to draw together aesthetic theory and historical evidence in the hopes not to 'solve' those ambiguities, but rather to appreciate them

9 Robert Pascall, *Playing Brahms: A Study in 19th-Century Performance*. Vol. 1, *Papers in Musicology.* (Nottingham, England: University of Nottingham, 1991), 3.

Chapter 1: Aspects of Textural Ambiguity

In recent decades musical analysis of Brahms has been focused to a large extent on a number of different types of ambiguity encountered within his music.[10] The kinds of ambiguity discussed in the Brahms analytical literature have been primarily harmonic, metrical, formal/structural, and motivic. This thesis is a first step in exploring some of the ways Brahms creates textural ambiguity: an ambiguity yet to be seriously examined in the Brahms analytical literature, though it has a great deal in common with other

10 Discussions of metrical ambiguity in Brahms's music include: Gabe Fankhauser, "Rhythmic Dissonance as Motion Propellant in Brahms's Intermezzo in A Flat Major," *GAMUT 8* (1998): 53-64; Peter H. Smith, "Liquidation, Augmentation, and Brahms's Recapitulatory Overlaps," *19th-Century Music* 17/3 (1994): 237-261; David Epstein, "Brahms and the Mechansims of Motion," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1990), 191-228; Walter Frisch, "The Shifting Bar Line: Metrical Displacement in Brahms," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1990), 139-164. Discussions of formal ambiguity include: Jonathan Dunsby, *Structural Ambiguity in Brahms: Analytical Approaches to Four Works* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981); Studies focused on harmonic ambiguity include: Peter H. Smith, "Brahms and Motivic 6/3 Chords," *Music Analysis* 16/2 (1997): 175-217; Joseph Dubiel, "Contradictory Criteria in a Work of Brahms," in *Brahms Studies I,* ed. David Brodbeck (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994): 81-110; Allen Cadwallader, "Foreground Motivic Ambiguity: Its Clarification at the Middleground Levels in Selected Late Piano Pieces of Johannes Brahms," *Music Analysis* 7, no. 1 (1988): 59-91; Roger Graybill, "Harmonic Circularity in Brahms's F Major Cello Sonata: An Alternative to Schenker's Reading in Free Composition," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988): 43-55. Studies that deal with a combination of these topics include: David Lewin, "On Harmony and Meter in Brahms's Op. 76, No. 8," *19th Century Music* 4/3 (1981): 261-265; Ryan McClelland, "Brahms's Capriccio in C Major, Op. 76, No. 8: Ambiguity, Conflict, Musical Meaning, and Performance," *Theory and Practice* 29 (2004): 69-94; John Rink, "Opposition and Integration in the Piano Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 79-97. Additional pertinent studies include: Agawu, Kofi. "Ambiguity in Tonal Music: A Preliminary Study." In *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Tonal Music*, ed. Anthony Pople, 86-107. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Roland Jordan and Emma Kafalenos, "The Double Trajectory: Ambiguity in Brahms and Henry James." *19th Century Music* 13, no. 2 (1989): 129-44; Webster, James. "The Alto Rhapsody: Psychology, Intertextuality, and Brahms's Artistic Development," *Brahms Studies* 3 (2001): 19-45.

ambiguities that have received scholarly attention.

I will begin by briefly outlining characterizations of ambiguities in Brahms with regard to other musical parameters, emphasizing their mutual reinforcement of a shared analytical paradigm. The predominance of certain recurring themes among diverse modes of analysis illustrates universal aspects of Brahms's musical language and suggests a general aesthetic outlook inherent in many of his compositional procedures. In Chapter 1 I will expand upon my discussion of textural ambiguity in the B Minor Ballade, referring to examples spanning the entire corpus of Brahms's solo piano literature that demonstrate the manifold ways in which he creates textural ambiguity. My characterizations of Brahms's textural ambiguity will be entirely congruous with prevailing characterizations of formal, metrical, and harmonic ambiguity, representing yet another layer of Brahms's overall penchant for ambiguity.

One of the central recurring themes in the analytical literature is Brahms's obscuring of various fundamental compositional frameworks from the listener. For example, Walter Frisch in his article on shifting bar lines in Brahms's chamber music identifies the establishment of a basic motive whose true metrical framework is obscured through a process of displacement, with the result that "even the most astute listener will become utterly disoriented." Frisch describes such passages as containing "an ambiguity between notated and perceived meter" and points out that the listener without a score, or without previous knowledge of the music, will be likely to misinterpret the true metrical context.[11] Other discussions of metrical ambiguity in Brahms include publications by John Rink, David Lewin, and Ryan McClelland12.

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11 Frisch, "The Shifting Bar Line," 145, 140, 147. Frisch credits Schoenberg as being the first critic to call attention to such ambiguities.

12 Rink, "Opposition and Integration;" Lewin, "On Harmony and Meter;" McClelland, "Brahms's Capriccio in C Major."

These differ from Frisch's discussion in that they describe a metrical instability arising from frequent alternation between triple and duple meter, while Frisch describes the displacement of a rhythmic motive to different beats within a bar, thus disguising the actual placement of the bar line and the metrical orientation of the motive itself. In either case the ambiguity could be said to arise from an ambivalence, or shifting between multiple metrical contexts alternately established within the same work.

Attention to such processes of concealment of the inner workings of a piece defines approaches to analysis of other aspects of Brahms's musical language. Apart from discussing Brahms's obscuring of metrical orientation scholars have commented on his obscuring of tonal structure through the avoidance of root-position tonic chords. Representative investigations of this aspect of Brahms's style are articles by Lewin and McClelland on the C Major Capriccio, Opus 76, no. 8: a work that does not contain a root position C Major chord until the final harmony.[13] Discussions of formal ambiguity in Brahms such as Dunsby's *Structural Ambiguity in Brahms: Analytical Approaches to Four Works*[14] focus on the blurring of structural boundaries through the seamlessness of transitions between sections.[15] The kinds of formal ambiguities that Dunsby describes create a special challenge to the listener with regard to recognizing sectional boundaries. As is the case with the kinds of tonal and metric ambiguity discussed in the Brahms literature, the result is that the music seems to invite multiple and conflicting interpretations at the same time, none of which can be definitively established.

An example of the exploration of related processes of concealment

13 Lewin, "On Harmony and Meter;" McClelland, "Brahms's Capriccio in C Major." See also Brahms's Intermezzo in B Flat Major, Opus 76, no. 4.
14 Dunsby, *Structural Ambiguity in Brahms: Analytical Approaches to Four Works.*
15 See also McClelland, "Brahms's Capriccio in C Major," 81-91.

and ambivalence within the Schenkerian literature is Allen Cadwallader's "Foreground Motivic Ambiguity: Its Clarification at Middleground Levels in Selected Late Piano Pieces of Johannes Brahms."[16] Cadwallader focuses in this article on what Schenker called "concealed motivic repetition," identifying note successions that "create the impression of a motive, but one which appears incongruous or indistinct in the prevailing harmonic/linear context." (59) Cadwallader attributes ambiguity in Brahms to the fact that "components of any given harmonic/contrapuntal framework ... are not always clearly articulated. On the contrary, they are sometimes concealed by conflicting characteristics." (60) The conflicts between contrapuntal and harmonic frameworks he identifies, what he calls "contextual dissonances", are fundamentally congruent with ambivalences between shifting metrical or tonal frameworks, and Brahms's frequent avoidance of the clear articulation of formal boundaries.

I have discussed elements of textural ambiguity in the B Minor Ballade, Opus 10, no. 4, that are centered on processes of concealment as well: in this case, the obscuring of the primary thematic line. Here, Brahms "veils" melodic material through a variety of textural devices: namely the saturation of the lower register, the low tessitura of the melodic line, its embedding within the accompaniment rather than isolation from it, and the use of a lower doubling voice to darken the melodic timbre. One of the primary ways Brahms obscures melodic material is through the depth and density of his accompaniments. In these cases, the murkiness of the musical surface is the foundation of the mysterious and darkly introspective character. In Chapter 1, I will show other examples of Brahms's concealment of melodic material behind almost impenetrable accompaniments.

16 Cadwallader, "Foreground Motivic Ambiguity."

Such masking of melodic material is an aspect of a larger and more subtle issue surrounding his characteristic textural ambiguity. By obscuring melodic lines behind "over-written" accompaniments, or entangling them within accompanimental figures as in the B Minor Ballade, Brahms was writing textures that resisted being separated into clearly apprehensible layers of foreground (melody) and background (accompaniment).[17] The separation of a musical texture into layers with a clear hierarchical order is essential to textural transparency. Just as Brahms avoids clear articulation of formal boundaries, and blurs the separation between tonal areas, he blurs the separation between elements of his overall texture and presents them within a hierarchical order that is constantly in a state of flux. The shifting relationship between the right hand's melodic line and the upper voice of the left hand in Figure 1b are an example of such ambivalence in voice hierarchy.

Brahms's use of the low register.

a. Variation 13 from Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Opus 24

Variation 13 in Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel,* Opus 24 [Figure 2], epitomizes Brahms's penchant for the dark quality of the piano's low register. The closely spaced chordal texture remains fixed in the register around and below middle C (C^1) for the entirety of the 'first' presentation of each strain (the second being an octave higher). The tight spacing of the left hand's rolled chords in particular, set in the bottom octaves

17 The use of the terms "foreground" and "background" in this context is not be confused with the use of those terms by Schenkerian theorists. In the context of this chapter the terms primarily refer to the degree to which individual voices stand out from the rest of the texture or recede from prominence.

of the piano, result in a menacing rumble. The timbre of the upper melodic voice because of its low range lacks the piercing quality that might distinguish

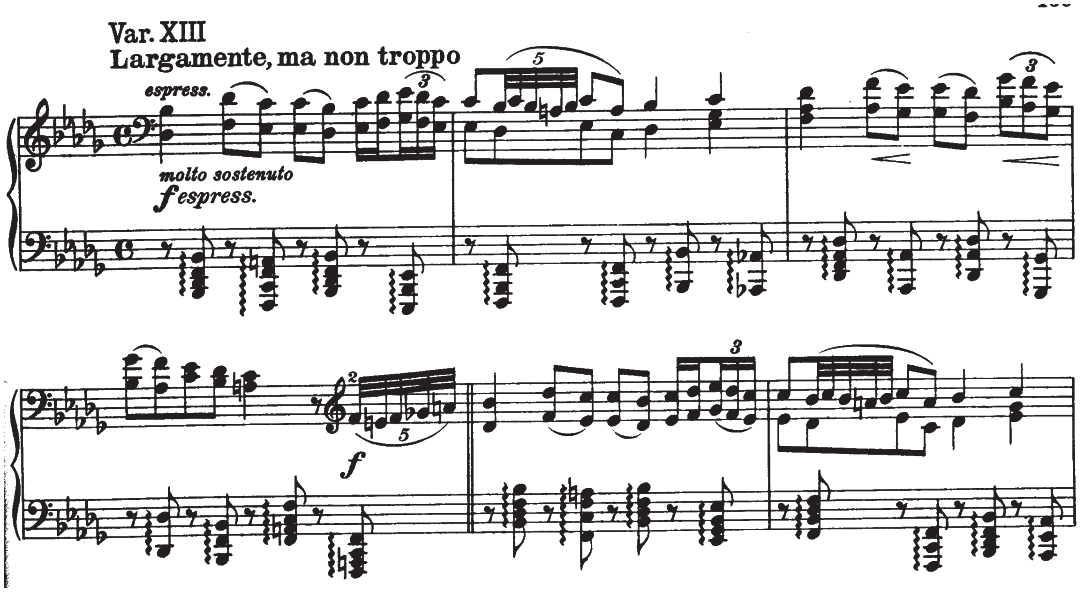


Figure 2
Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Opus 24
mm. 1-6

it mroe clearly from the rest of the texture. Another factor minimizing melodic separation is its proximity to the lower chord members. The balance overall is decidedly weighted towards the bottom. The melody is not supported by octave doubling, but primarily by sixths. The bass, on the other hand, is doubled at the octave throughout, and the left hand usually inserts inner chord members between these notes, further skewing the balance away from the melody. The result is an evocation of immense weight and gravity.

b. The C-Sharp Minor Capriccio, Opus 76, no. 5

The C-Sharp Minor *Capriccio,* Opus 76, no. 5, exhibits many of the same textural features. The texture at the outset is balanced in such a way that the thematic material is overwhelmed by the accompaniment. [Figure 3a]

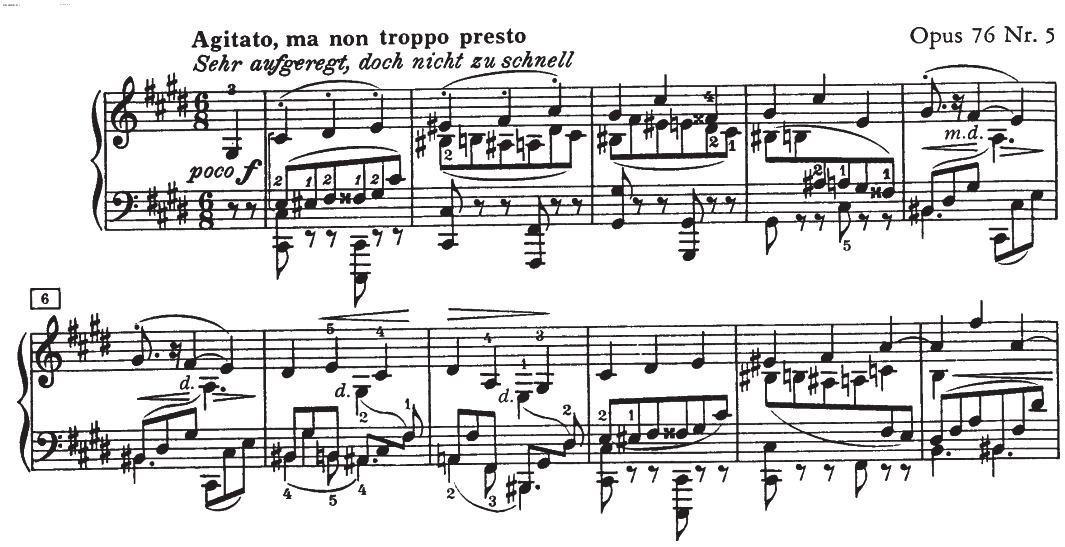


Figure 3a
Capriccio in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 76, no.5
mm. 1-11

The upper melodic voice's low tessitura and proximity to the chromatic line interferes with its ability to ring out over the sonic backdrop. Furthermore, Brahms's chromatic saturation creates a snarl of sound that blurs the distinctness of individual notes. Through much of the section the bass line is reinforced though octave doublings, while the melody itself is not doubled. In short, Brahms has crafted a texture in which the melodic material is scarcely able to assert itself over the din of the accompaniment.

When the opening material returns, however, its texture is transformed. In the primary theme [Figure 3b], the obstacles to melodic presence have been

removed, and the section takes on a triumphant note. The octave doubling of

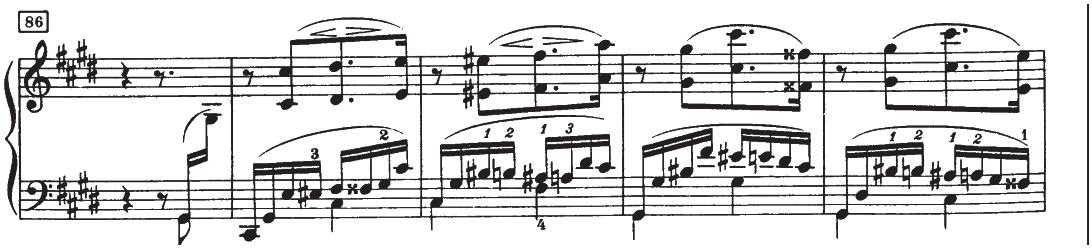


Figure 3b
Capriccio in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 76, no.5
mm. 86-90

the bass line is removed, thinning the sonic backdrop, while it is the melody that is reinforced through doubling. The execution of the accompaniment is relegated entirely to the left hand, facilitating a more powerful and uninhibited execution of the melody by an unfettered right hand. Furthermore, the theme soars high into the treble and is separated registrally from the chromatic line.

These differences imply that Brahms was well aware of the effect of his "over-written" accompaniment and over-saturation of the piano's lower register. In this work Brahms uses the murky quality of the piano's lower register not merely as an arbitrary experiment in local color, but as a psychological region with a specific dramatic function. He has deliberately crafted an almost impenetrable "tangle of sound"[18] at the outset as a signifier for chaos. The work's drama is embodied in a struggle and ultimate triumph over this chaos. Contrasts between dark, heavy textures in the depths of the

18 Taken from Dame Ethel Smyth's recollection of Brahms at the piano: "lifting a submerged theme out of a tangle of music he used jokingly to ask us to admire the gentle sonority of his 'tenor thumb'." Ethyl Smyth, *Impressions That Remained: Memoirs*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1919), vol. 1, 266. Quoted in Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," 62.

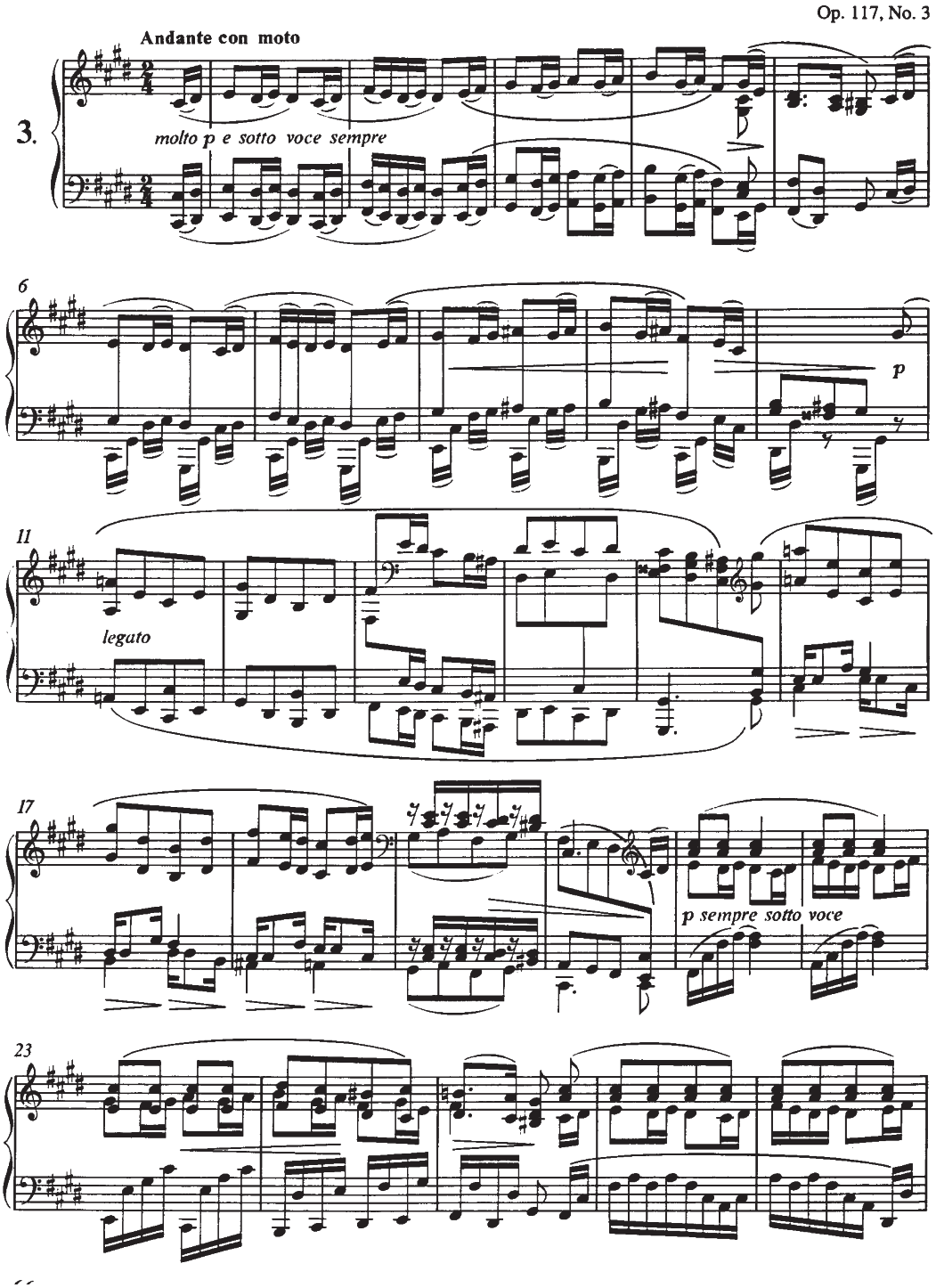


Figure 4a
Brahms C-Sharp Minor Intermezzo, Opus 117, no. 3
mm. 1-27

piano, followed by a dramatic movement towards and away from varying states of clarity and brightness, constituted a compositional technique that Brahms exploited to great effect throughout his career. The dramatic structure of this as well as many of Brahms's piano works is defined by striking contrasts in register and spacing.

c. The C-Sharp Minor Intermezzo, Opus 117, no.3

One such work is C-Sharp Minor Intermezzo Opus 117, no. 3 [Figure 4a]. Brahms's marking at the outset is molto **p** e sotto voce sempre, and the atmosphere is one of muted longing and brooding introspection. As in the lento section of the B Minor Ballade, the dark quality of the melodic line is partially attributable to lower octave doubling and melodic concentration in the tenor register. The piece opens with triple octave unisons that extend down into the bass register. Low unisons permeate the outer sections of the Intermezzo. This manner of scoring, along with the consistently low tessitura of the primary melodic material, often submerged beneath cover tones in the right hand, is an essential ingredient in the shrouded atmosphere of the Intermezzo's outer sections.

The middle section [Figure 4b], with its turn to the submediant, spreading out of the sonority, and brighter treble doublings, is a release from the weight and confinement of the outer sections. The effect of these textural changes illustrates the specificity of Brahms's associations with register. The expansive, leaping gestures of the middle interlude's thematic material, pushing high into the treble register, embody a completely different psychological disposition than that of the outer sections. There, melodic

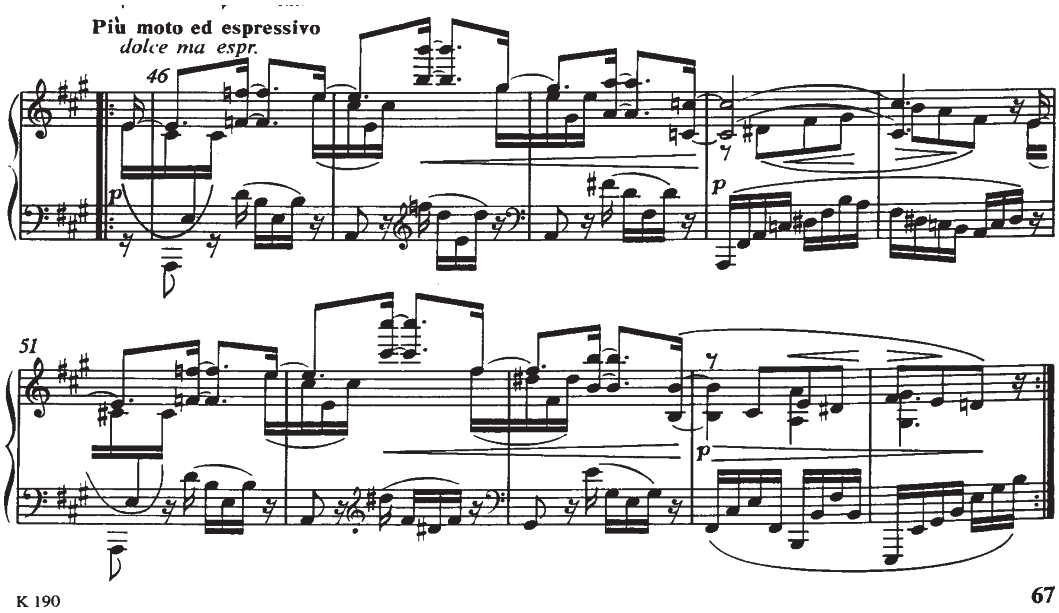


Figure 4b
Brahms C-Sharp Minor Intermezzo, Opus 117, no. 3.
mm. 46-55

material is confined to a narrow compass and stepwise motion. Corresponding with the new freedom of motion in the middle interlude's jagged melodic line is a new spaciousness in the accompaniment. The subsidiary middle voice is lifted away from the bass notes, which are separated by rests. This allows for a more transparent sonic backdrop that is a distinct contrast to the outer sections.

d. The G Minor Rhapsody, Opus 79, no. 2

As the previous examples demonstrate, Brahms often creates textural contrast in his piano music through adjusting the doubling to emphasize the either the lower or the upper register, alternating between tightly spaced and "open" sonorities, and registral placement of the melodic line. The G Minor

Rhapsody, Opus 79, no. 2, is still another work that alternates between textures favoring the bass line and textures favoring the thematic material. Here too, the changes in doubling, and the contrasts between textures weighted towards the lower range of the piano and those that stretch into the treble, impart a vivid dramatic structure to the work, effecting a move out of darkness into brightness and back again.

At the outset [Figure 5a], the bass line sounds in octaves while the doubling of the thematic line is broken into arpeggio. Compare this with mm. 14-30 [Figure 5b], where the melodic line's doublings are simultaneous, and the comparatively higher placement of the bass line, now part of an arpeggio, creates a considerably brighter sonority. In mm. 21-24, Brahms underpins an un-doubled tenor line, confined to the register around middle C, with bass octaves set in the extreme low range of the piano. At mm. 25-31, however, the same material emerges out of the darkness as the music is lifted an octave higher and the upper voice is doubled in octaves as well. In this work, as well as in the Intermezzo and the Capriccio, it is not only the manner of doubling but the placement of the music in specific registers that determines the brightness or murkiness of the sonority.

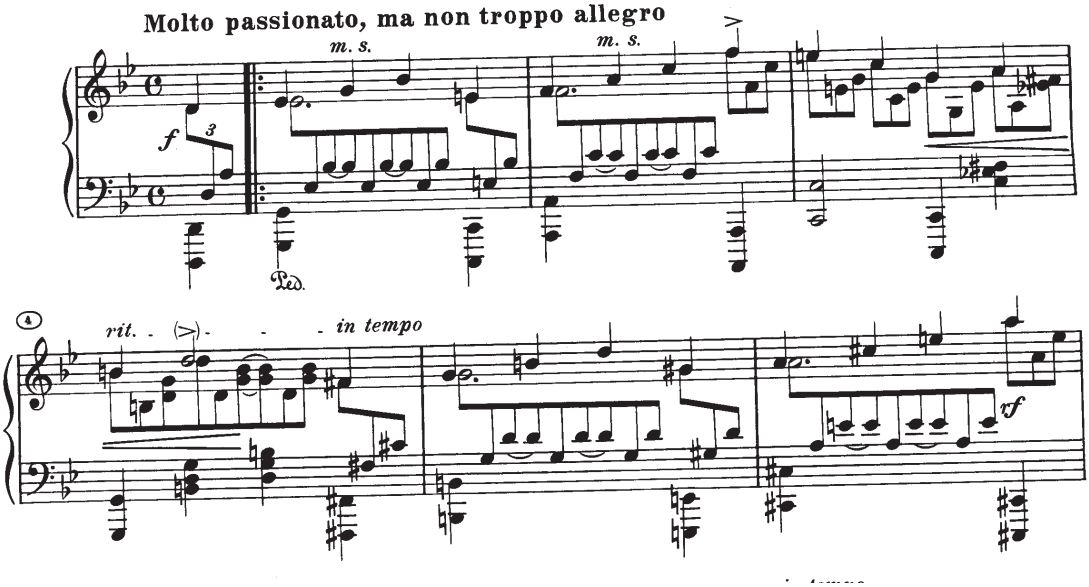


Figure 5a
Rhapsody in G Minor, Opus 79, no. 2
mm. 1-6

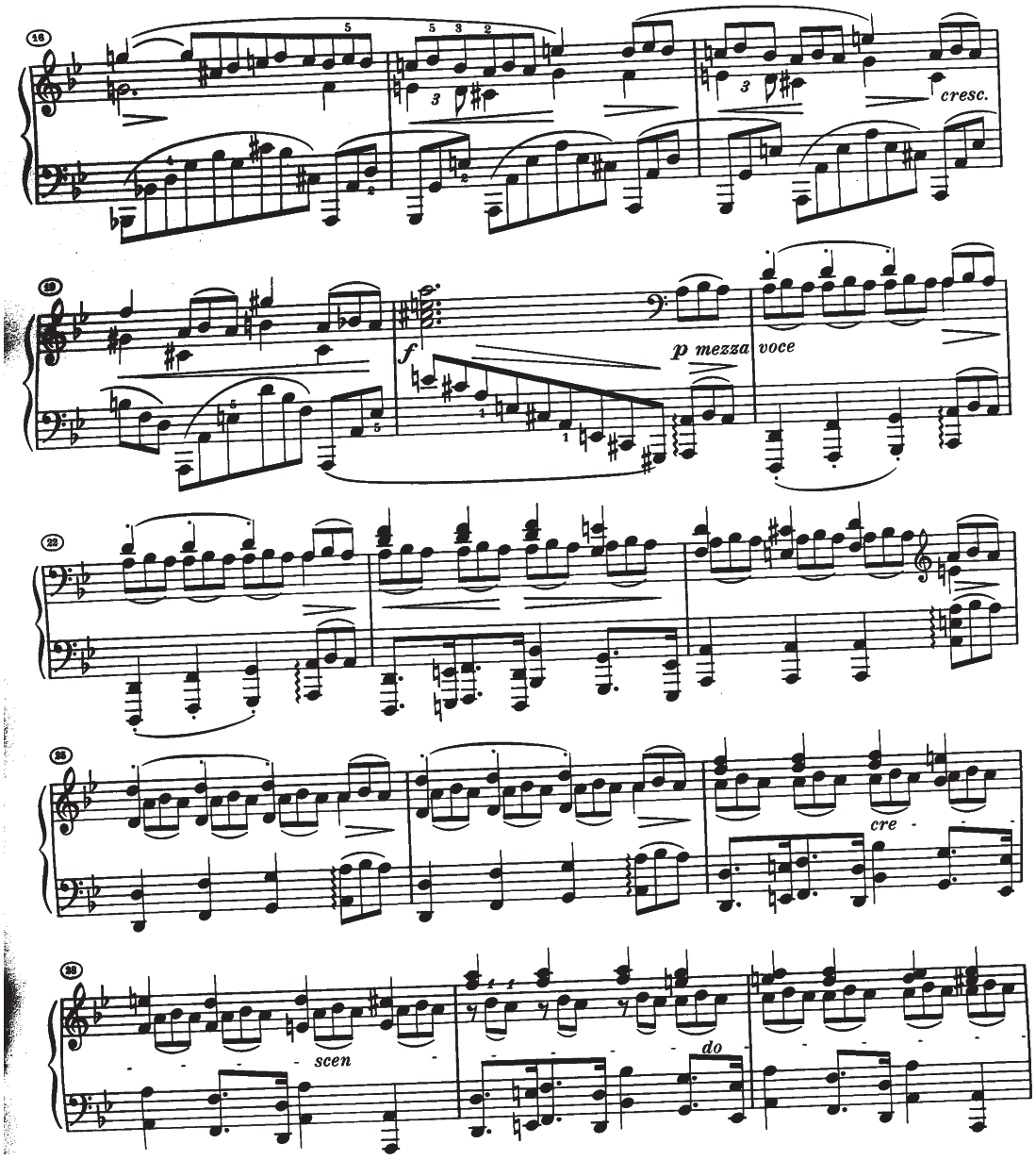


Figure 5b
Rhapsody in G Minor, Opus 76, no. 2
mm. 14-30

e. The F Sharp Minor Capriccio, Opus 76, no.1

An excellent example of the use of registral contrast to create dramatic structure is the F Sharp Minor *Capriccio*, Opus 76, no. 1. [Figure 6a] The piece begins entirely in the shadows, with left-hand arpeggiations that emanate from the depths of the keyboard, becoming melodic fragments as they ascend. As the passage intensifies, the right hand begins to strive further upward until at m. 9 a fortissimo arpeggio erupts, soaring high into the treble and racing back down in a brilliant flash. Confinement to the lower registers in mm. 1-8 creates enormous tension in this opening section. Unlike the lento section of the B Minor Ballade, which is settled in a somber fog, the opening section of the Capriccio is volatile. The upwardly striving melodic fragments, underpinned by a gradual crescendo from m. 5, create the impression of a struggling to break the bonds of registral confinement. The explosiveness of mm. 9-10 signals the arduousness of that struggle.

In stark contrast to the work's agitated opening, the arpeggiated motive is transformed in the concluding section [mm. 72-85] [Figure 6b] into gossamer strands cascading over a tenor melody. The psychological impact of registral displacement is brought into sharp relief in this passage. The sixteenth-note passagework that characterizes the work, initially a chaotic fog, is now a transparent veil adding harmonic luster to a gentle tenor melody. This heavenly interlude closes as the arpeggios begin to unfold downward at m. 77. The close-position chords from m. 79 to the end recall once again the blurred quality of the low register and in this context serve as an echo of the fog that the work began in.

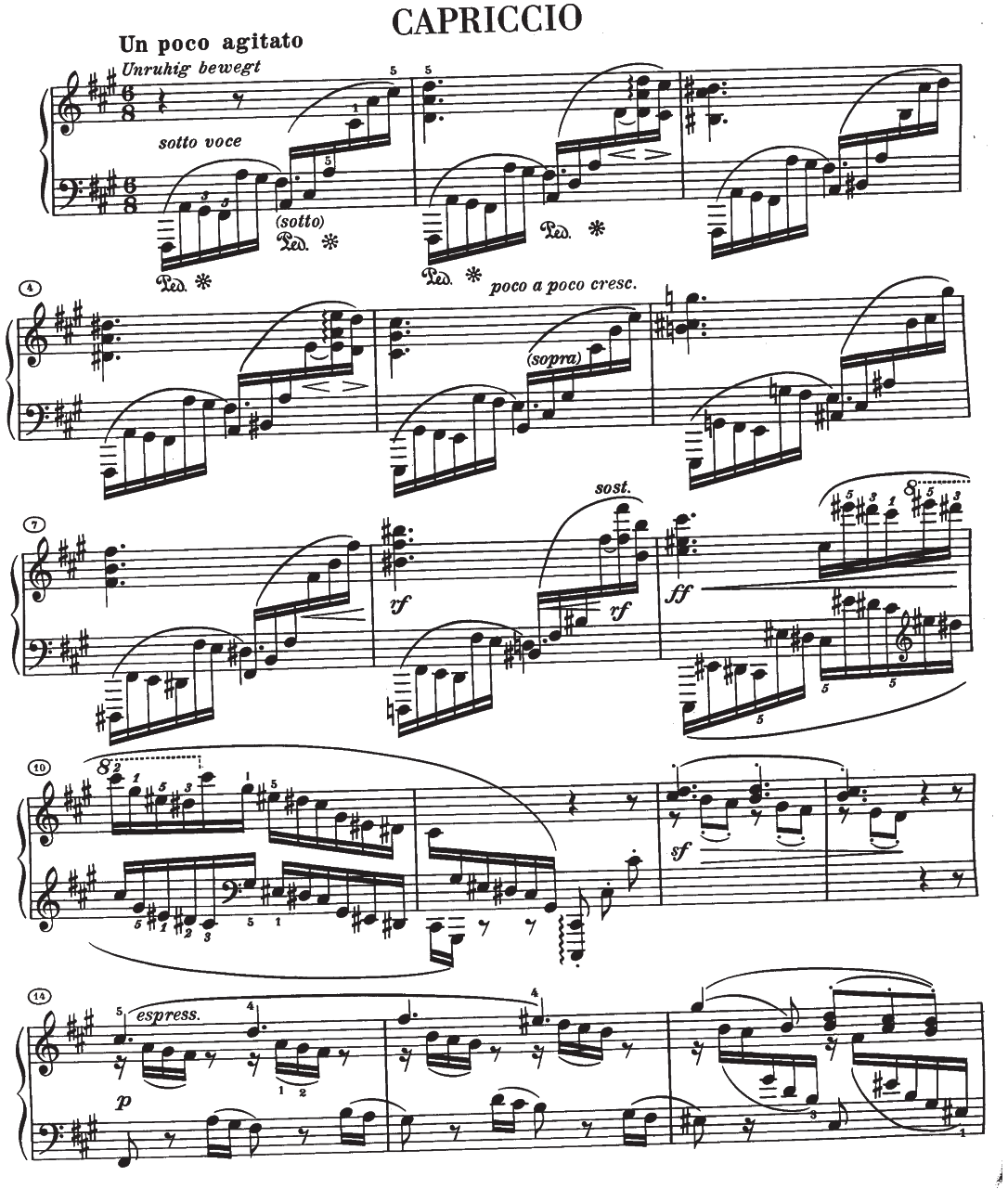


Figure 6a
Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor, Opus 76, no. 1
mm. 1-16

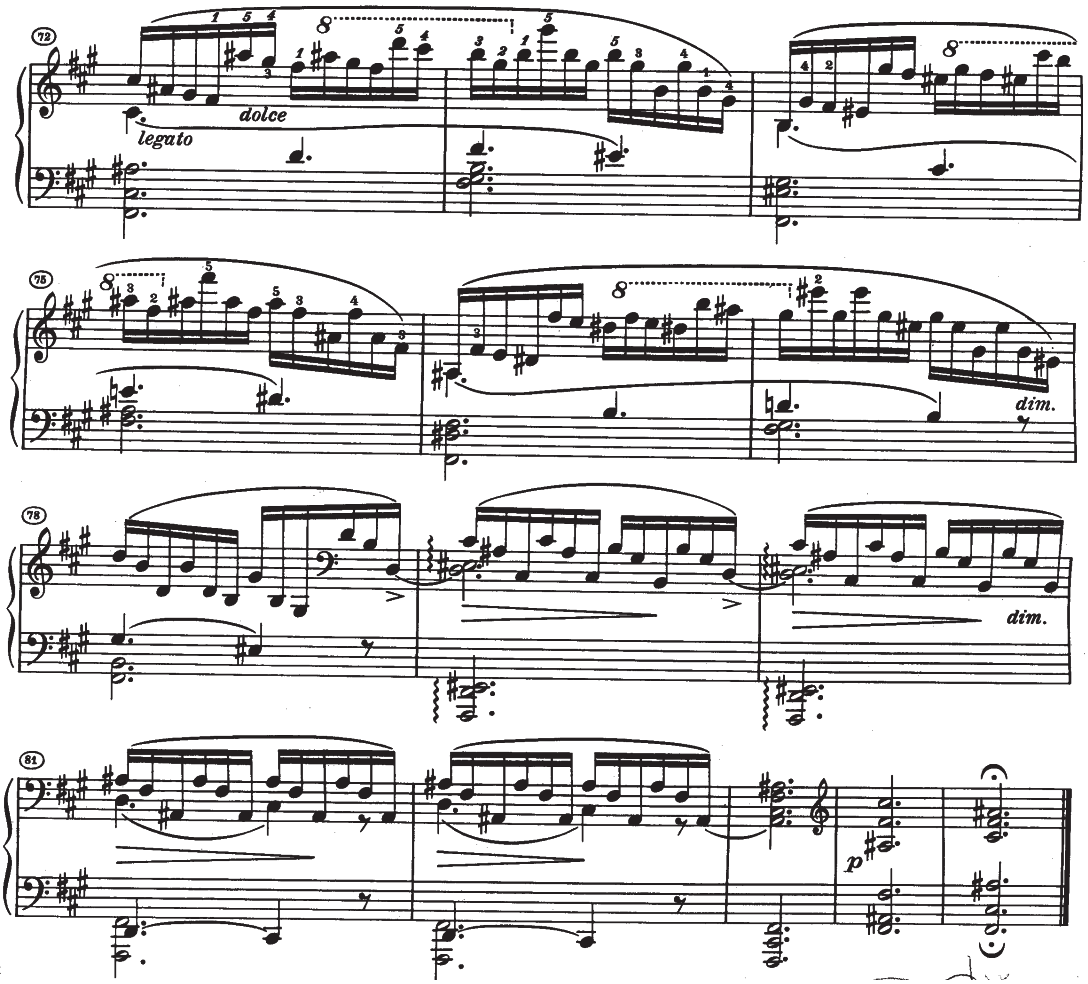


Figure 6b
Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor, opus 76, no. 1
mm. 72-85

f. The E Flat Major Rhapsody, Opus 119, no.4

In the E Flat Major *Rhapsody*, Opus 119 no. 4, Brahms uses textural transformations, not to delineate sections that shape the drama *across* the entire work, but *within* a given section. This process is somewhat analogous to the textural transformations in the G Minor *Rhapsody*, discussed above. This takes place within two corresponding sections, in which he presents the same

thematic material first in C Minor, then in C Major [mm 65-85, and mm 132-151]. Again, the material is initially scored in close-positioned chordal writing, with the primary thematic voice rooted in the register around middle C [mm. 65-72] [Figure 7a].

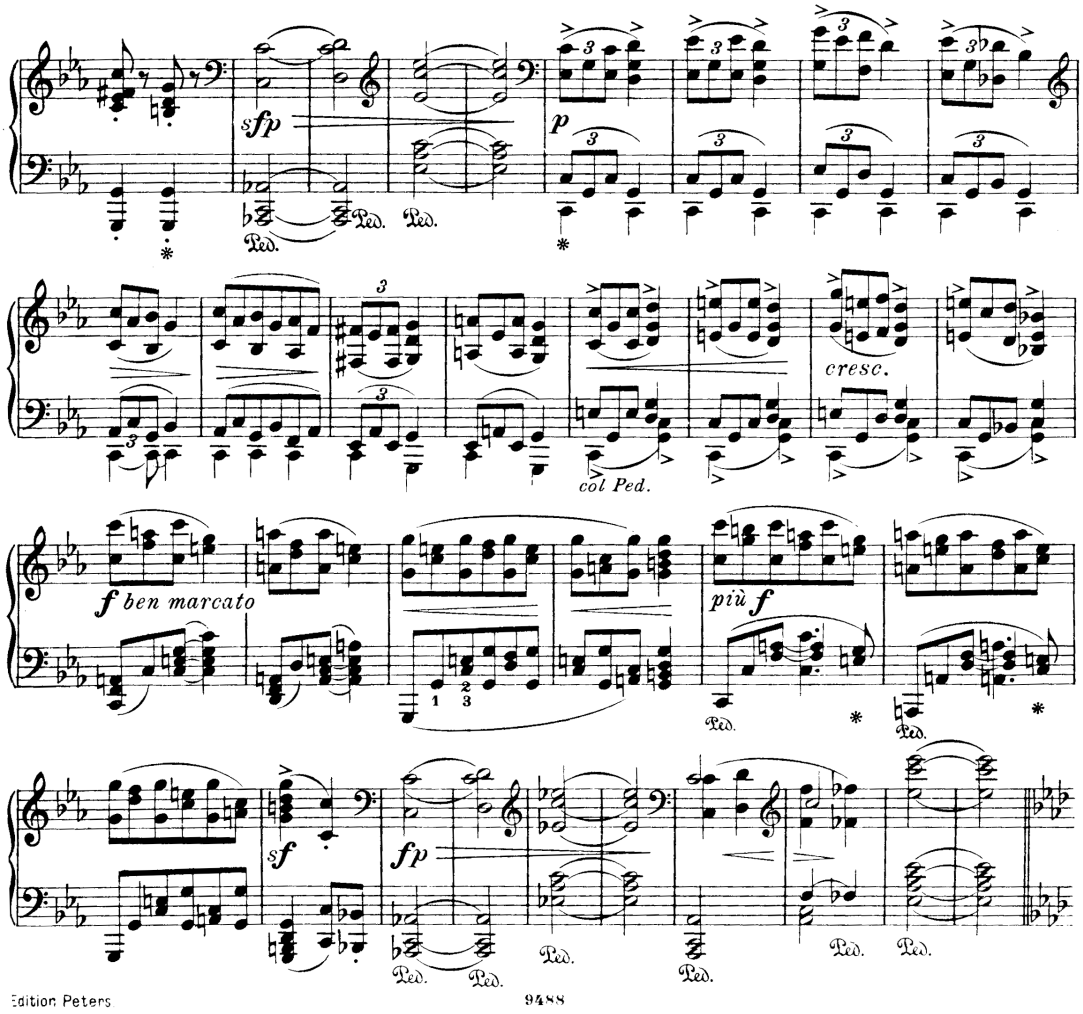


Figure 7a
Rhapsody in E-Flat Major, Opus 119, no. 4
65-92

At the consequent of this phrase, beginning m. 73, the melodic voice pushes up into the treble register, ultimately ascending to two octaves above the middle C it began on. Though the sonority at this point contains more harmonic notes, they are dispersed across a wider compass resulting in a more transparent and open sound. The effect is repeated in mm. 132-151 [Figure 7b] with an even wider expansion of the registral compass. This example illustrates that it is not only registral displacement by which Brahms creates contrasts between transparent and dense textures, but also through the closeness or spaciousness of the sonority.

g. The D Minor Ballade, Opus 10 no.4

The somber character of Brahms's D Minor *Ballade*, Opus 10 no. 1 depends largely on some of the features outlined above. The octave doubling of the principal melody [mm. 1-4] is further darkened by the left hand's additional doubling, two octaves below [Figure 8a]. The entire section is weighted heavily towards the low register. Its opening eight-bar phrase establishes a downward pull with descending sigh motives beginning at the end of m. 5 that come to rest in m. 8. Mm. 14-21 are a repetition of the opening phrase except that the corresponding sigh motives sink still further downward to FF at m. 21. These eight-bar phrases constitute the a and a' phrases within the a-b-a'-b' phrase structure of the initial A section [mm. 1-26]. Similarly, the b phrases exhibit a downward pull with melodic material that is stated and then repeated a fifth lower. Together, the murkiness of the melodic doublings, prominence of low bass octaves, and consistent downward phrase motion create an aura of oppressive weight and gravity.

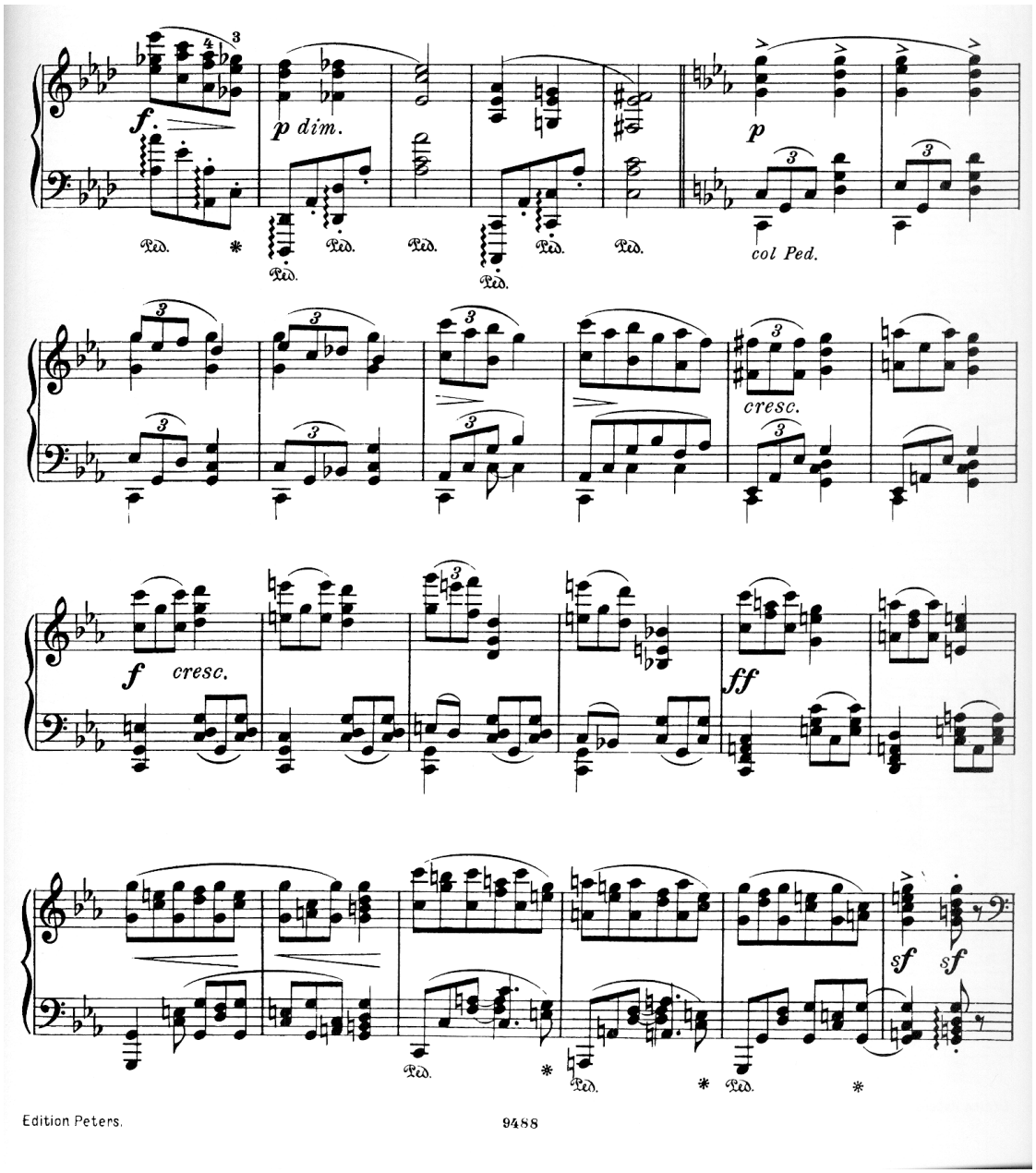


Figure 7b
Rhapsody in E-Flat Major, Opus 119, no. 4
mm. 128-152

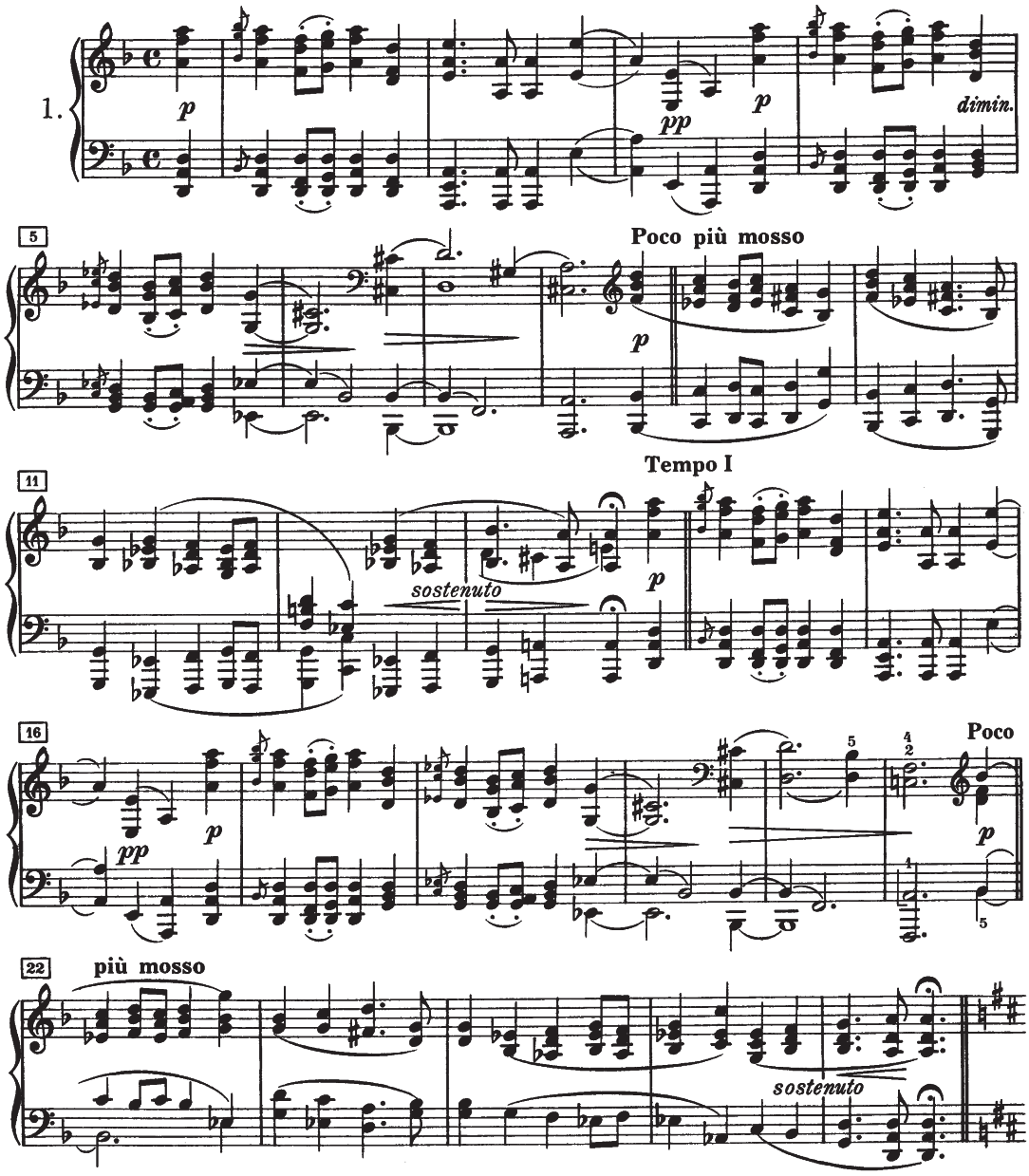


Figure 8a
Ballade in D Minor, Opus 10, no.1
mm. 1-26

The texture of the B section [mm. 27-59] [Figure 8b] stands in vivid contrast. The distribution of parts over a wider compass, and increasing brilliance of the treble in its extended upward drive, represent a powerful

move out of the confinement and downward pull of the A section. The effect of this new spaciousness in sonority, along with the turn to D Major, could well be described as a "change in lighting". At m. 43, the very apex of this dramatic upward surge both in register and in dynamic, a long gradual descent back into the low register begins, heralding the return of the A section. As the chord spacing becomes denser and more confined, and settles into a lower *tessitura* accompanied by the drop in dynamic, we feel ourselves being drawn inevitably back into the somber, veiled atmosphere of the A section.

Certain passages in the D Minor *Ballade,* and other works discussed above, do feature spacious, transparent piano textures. We may presume that when Brahms wrote densely scored textures in the low register, in spite of the dramatic decrease in textural clarity, he did it for a particular effect. Pianists in particular should try to understand his reasons for doing so. In a work like the D Minor *Ballade*, projecting the uppermost notes of the opening theme in the right hand and underplaying the lower doubling notes, in the right hand and especially the left hand, will give the melodic line a bright and clear quality. In all of the works referred to above, even the C Sharp Minor *Capriccio*, the pianist can thin out the accompanimental material and work to demarcate melodic lines over the rest of the texture. Such an approach would result in the clearest sonority possible, even given the denseness of Brahms's piano textures. However, in many cases this approach would negate the contrasts between confined, chaotic, dark sonorities and bright, spacious

Figure 8b.

Ballade in D Minor, Opus 10, no. 1

mm. 27-60

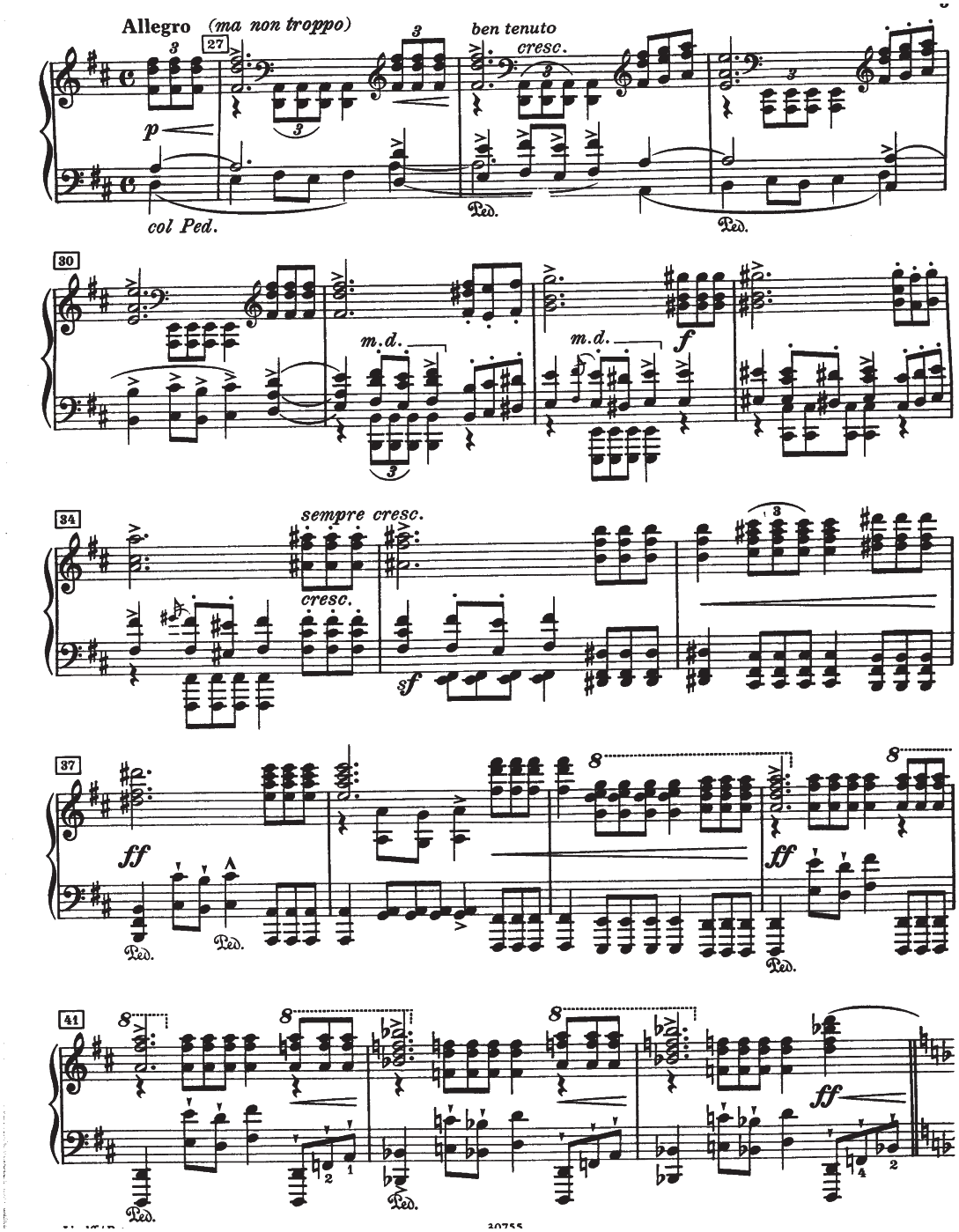
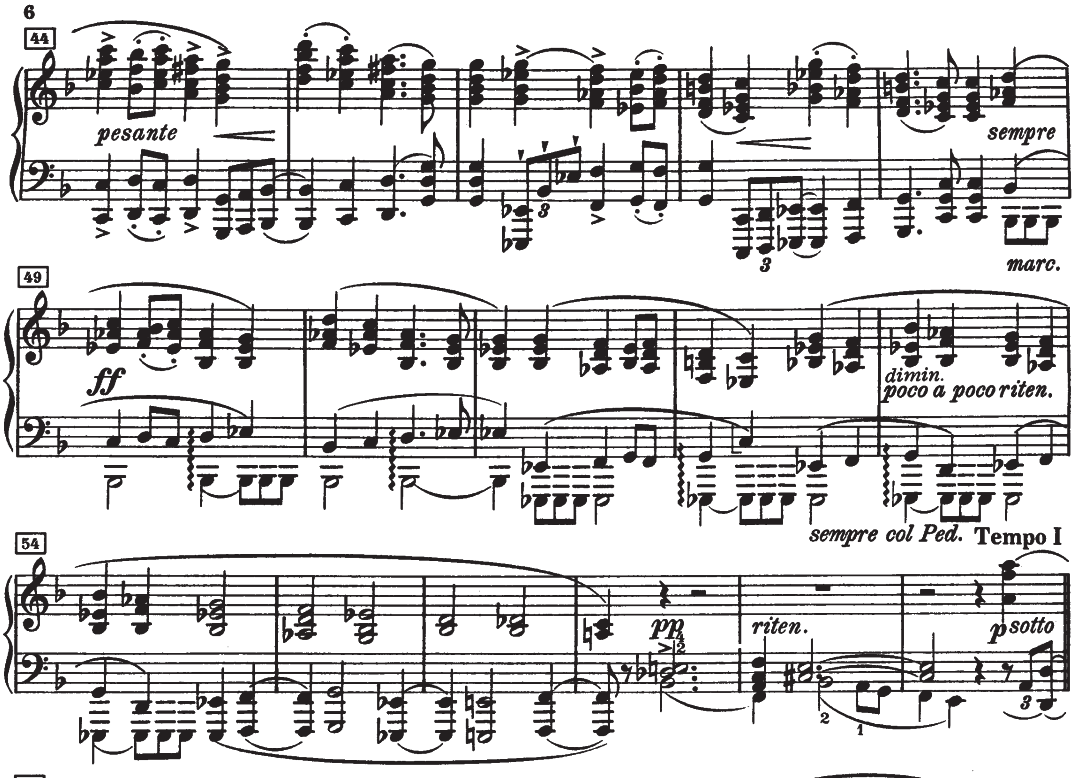

Allegro (ma non troppo)
ben tenuto
cresc.
p
col Ped.
Ped.
m.d.
f
sempre cresc.
cresc.
sf
ff
8

Figure 8b (Continued)



sonorities by which the dramatic structure of the work is defined. Instead, Brahms's use of low doublings presents the pianist with the opportunity to darken the melodic timbre, greatly altering the psychological impact as compared with treble-oriented textures. Furthermore, rather than viewing Brahms's characteristic dense accompaniments as a "problem," the pianist may utilize the buildup of sound to partially obscure thematic lines, creating an evocatively mysterious atmosphere.

The intricacy of Brahms's polyphony

I have discussed ways in which Brahms uses saturation of the low register to cast a somber atmosphere over a given work. In such passages the density of the texture and weighting of the balance towards the accompaniment present serious obstacles to melodic clarity. Apart from issues of balance, Brahms often eschews clearly foregrounding melodic lines through the intricacy of his part-writing. In these textures, melodic lines sometimes temporarily almost disappear, subsumed into the harmonic backdrop, or are pushed back into a subsidiary role as new lines materialize, often from what were formerly background harmonic tones. By "harmonic tones" I mean chord members that are there for harmonic support rather than to provide melodic interest; though in the next few examples I will show cases where the degree to which such parts are independently melodic or primarily harmonic support is in flux. Because of this, the hierarchy among individual voices in his polyphonic writing is also frequently flux, with thematic priority migrating between voices. Furthermore, the density and complexity of Brahms's part-writing, with additional voices continuously emerging within close proximity to existing voices, sometimes renders the listener's task of following the voice-leading extraordinary challenging, particularly without access to a score. In this section I will discuss how, apart from using the buildup of overtones and dark quality of the low register, Brahms crafts the veiled piano texture through the subtlety and unpredictability of his polyphony.

One way that Brahms minimizes the foreground presence of his melodic lines is by setting them beneath cover tones, so that the melody is entangled within the texture rather than isolated from it. A few of these

examples have already been discussed: among them the *piu lento* section from the Ballade in B Minor, Opus 10 no. 4 and the C Sharp Minor Intermezzo, Opus 117 no. 3, where in both cases the melody is often covered by harmonic tones. In the C Major *Intermezzo,* Opus 119 no. 3, [Figure 9] the melody is given primarily to an inner voice and is covered by two harmonic tones almost throughout the piece.As so often, Brahms reveals his fascination here with thematic material that is partially hidden behind a thin harmonic gauze of cover tones: "under the veil," as it were.

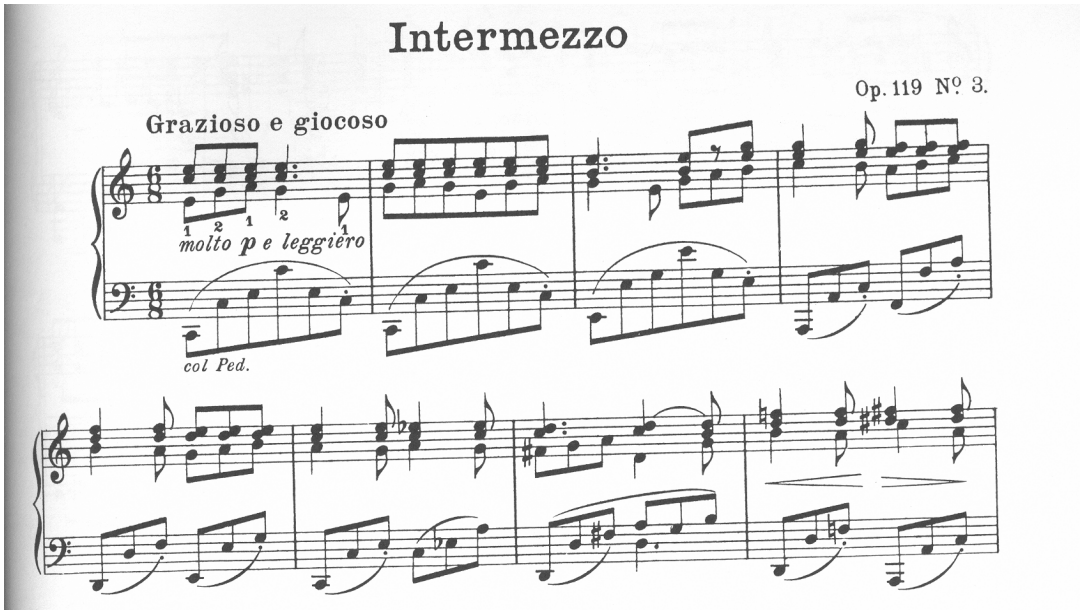


Figure 9
Intermezzo in C Major, opus 119, no. 3
mm. 1-8

a. The F Major Romanze, Opus 118 no. 5

The F Major Romanze, Opus 118 no. 5, is a more complex example. Initially, the primary thematic line is in the alto voice, doubled by the left-hand's tenor, and is covered by an upper voice. The relationship between the parts is not merely a thematic line submerged beneath cover tones, however; the upper voice constitutes an independent line whose relative independence fluctuates throughout the opening section (mm. 1-16) [Figure 10a]. The thematic priority of the two voices is in constant flux throughout the section. Furthermore, these changes in the independence and hierarchy of individual parts are seamless, occurring in the middle of musical phrases rather than at articulated points delineating new phrases or sections.

In mm. 1-3 the alto line has more melodic interest than the upper voice, which doubles at the upper sixth in primarily parallel motion; the lower octave doubling reinforces its primacy. In m. 4 however, primary melodic interest resides in the uppermost voice. If the pianist initially stratifies the inner voice because of its thematic content, that balance of parts would have to change in m. 4, where the alto line is no longer doubled. It is hard to imagine a performance where the alto voice continues to be projected over the soprano in the manner illustrated in Figure 10b (in this and subsequent examples voicing is indicated by the noteheads). Such a change in voice hierarchy happens again at m. 8, with the soprano taking over thematic material that had previously been in the alto part. In both cases there is a four-measure phrase in which the alto voice assumes priority through the first three

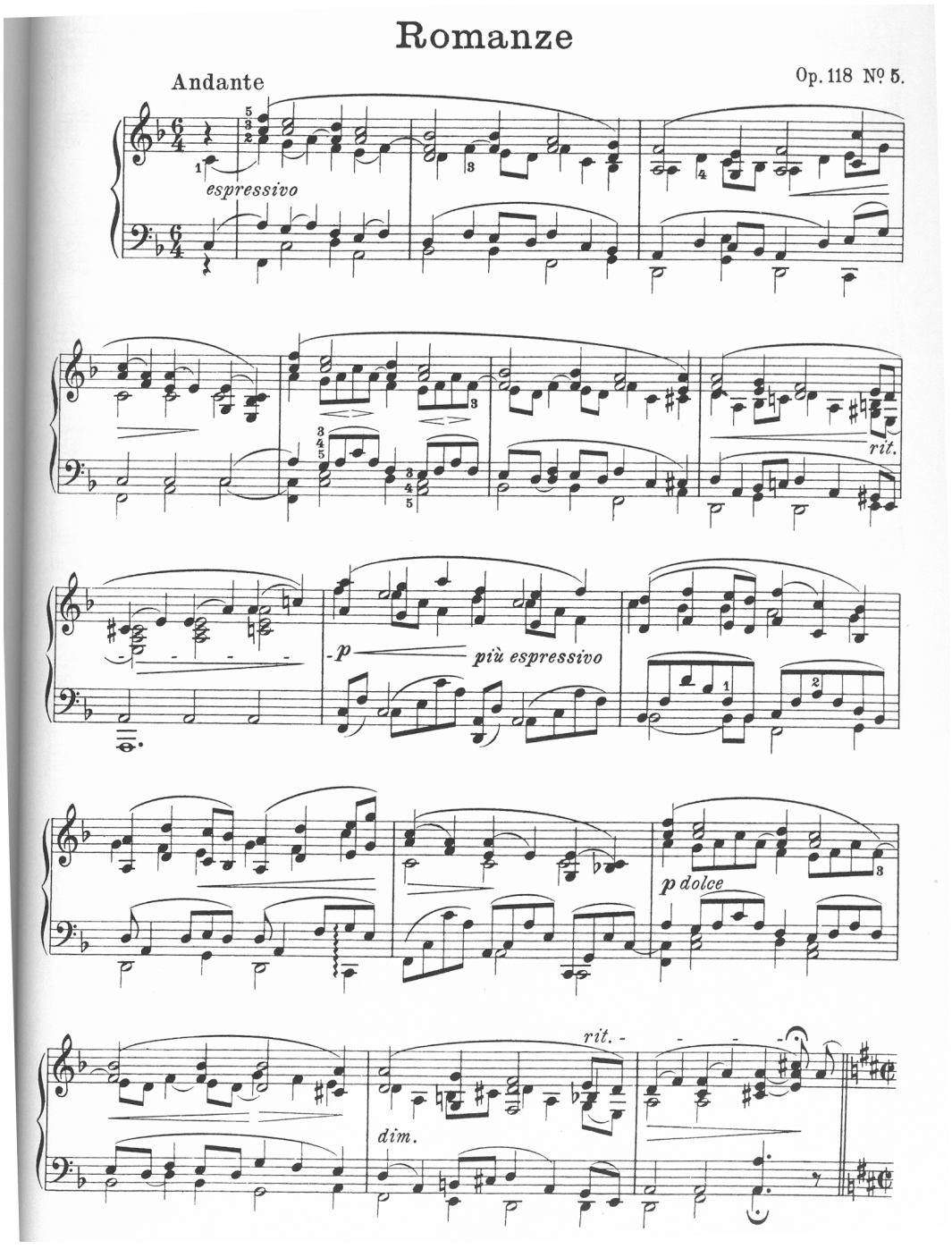


Figure 10a
Romanze in F Major, Opus 118, no. 5
mm. 1-16

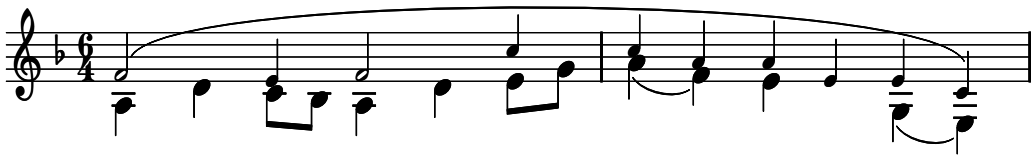


Figure 10b.
Romanze in F Major, Opus 118, no. 5
mm 3-4

measures, while the soprano takes over thematic priority in the fourth measure, with its gradually emerging independence in m. 3 and particularly m. 7, because of the switch from parallel to contrary motion.

Another textural transformation that takes places between mm. 7-8 is the change from a contrapuntal texture to a homophonic one. One can trace a 5-voice texture through m. 7, but in m. 8 the identity of the individual voices dissolves. The temporary clarity of this homophonic measure brings the intricacy of the layering of parts within the opening A section into relief. Momentarily there is a defined contrast between background and foreground material. Thematic material is in the top voice and the relative absence of activity in the lower voices makes them as unobtrusive as possible. This passage illustrates a changing hierarchy and function between parts that is often found in Brahms's piano works. At times, a line that is temporarily a foreground melody either assumes a subsidiary role, receding from the foreground, or else more or less disappears into the harmonic backdrop. The inner voices in m. 7 of the Romanze are independent members of a contrapuntal texture while in m. 8 have become more transparent; the melodic line clearly stands out from them. The relationship between the parts is not stable but variable, and the listener (and performer) subtly changes listening focus throughout the section.

Awareness of voice-leading and hierarchies among multiple voices is a critical concern for the performer. Pianists communicate their sense of the independence and/or thematic priority of individual parts through the extent to which they organize the musical texture into hierarchical layers through dynamic contrast — voicing. The seamlessness of the transitions in voice hierarchy within the Romanz*e* requires special handling from the performer. Just as most performers would avoid the manner of voicing illustrated in Figure 10b, it is equally hard to imagine the manner of voicing illustrated in Figure 10c. This would lead to the mistaken impression that the alto line consists of Figure 10d.

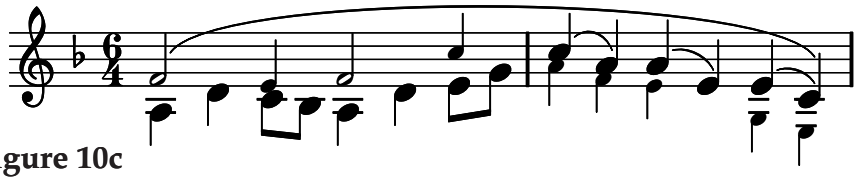


Figure 10c

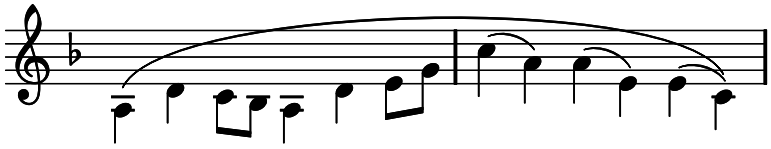


Figure 10d

The subtlety of the part-writing here is analogous to the situation encountered in the *lento* of the B Minor Ballade. There, Brahms has entangled the melody within the accompaniment and asks the performer not to disentangle it. The practice of projecting melodic lines, and underplaying the rest of the texture for the sake of clarity, is well suited to homophonic textures where the melody is isolated from the accompaniment, but is often

far too simple for the subtlety of Brahms's textures. In the F Major Romanze, though the alto and soprano lines temporarily assume roles as thematic and supportive/accompanimental voice, these roles change quickly. The pianist's challenge with regard to the changing hierarchies in the Romanze is making these shifts gradually in the transitional measures; i.e. mm. 3 and 7. It requires an extraordinarily fine control of voicing to gradually solidify the soprano line through these measures so that its subsequent assumption of foreground is arrived at naturally.

b. The E-Flat Major Intermezzo, Opus 117 no. 1

The E-Flat Major Intermezzo, Opus 117, no. 1 [Figure 11a] is another work in which the melody is the alto voice in the right hand, while the upper voice varies between shifting degrees of harmonic or melodic interest. As the piece begins, the upper voice repeatedly sounds a tonic pedal—E Flat. In mm. 5 and 6 it gains some melodic interest, doubling the alto at the third. By the end of m. 6, though, the primary thematic material has migrated into the bass and the soprano line assumes greater melodic interest, sharing prominence with the bass. The change from pedal to doubling voice to melodic voice is seamless and gradual, and as we find ourselves in a texture with a completely different hierarchy of voices we are barely aware of how the change came about.

The subtle reordering of voices in the right hand from m. 6 to m. 7 is analogous to that in the Romanze, and presents the pianist with similar challenges. Comparing the right hand in m. seven to the right hand in m. 6, the local difference is barely perceptible. In either case we have a primarily

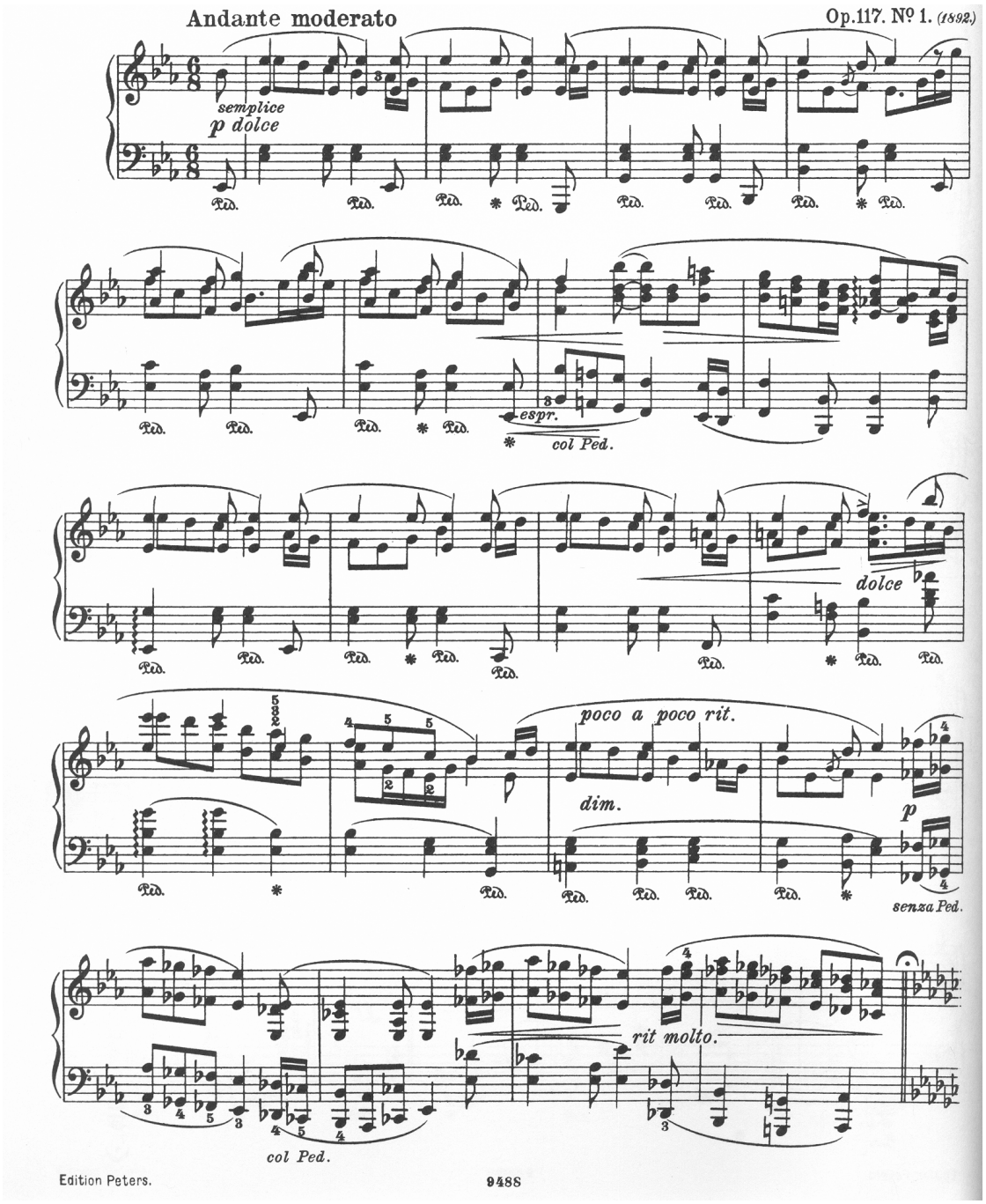


Figure 11a
Intermezzo In E-Flat Major, opus 117, no. 1
mm. 1-20

stepwise moving line supported by parallel harmonic tones. Following mm. 1-4, in which the alto is the lone melodic voice, we are likely to interpret mm. 5-6 as a continuation of the alto as primary melodic line. Nevertheless, the soprano line becomes a secondary parallel voice, thus more prominent within the musical texture than when it was a pedal tone. However, though the alto is initially the primary voice, it is hard to conceive of a performance in which this line continues to be projected as the main melodic line from the middle of m. 7 onward, as in Figure 11b.

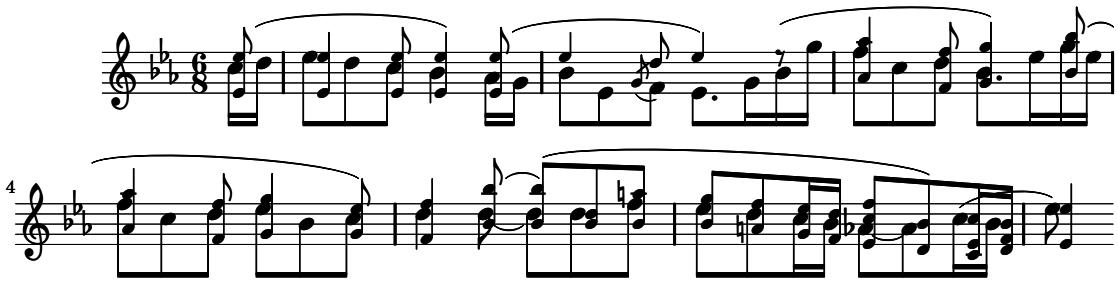


Figure 11b
Intermezzo in E-Flat Major, Opus 117, no. 1
mm. 2-9

As in the Romanze, the soprano line has temporarily supplanted the alto. Yet here the situation is somewhat more complicated in that at m. 7 the bass line also assumes a role as a thematic voice. Pianists must determine how to balance the right hand's thematic material, in m. 7, with the bass. This is unavoidable; one communicates either a sense of hierarchy or equality by respectively favoring or not favoring either part. At the same time they must determine, with respect to the relative melodic distinctness of the soprano and alto lines, what the relationship between these parts at m. 7 is to that in mm. 5

and 6, and by extension to m. 1; where the hierarchy of parts, and primacy of the alto line, is most straightforward. In other words, to what extent will the alto voice be delineated over the soprano's cover tones at m. 1, to what extent, if at all, will the soprano be delineated over the alto at m. 7, and how does this change in balance come about? A performance that embraces the subtlety of these shifting relationships will be one that refrains from marking out melodies "too much," and strives for the most seamless transitions in balance.

The more straightforward texture with which the piece begins is restored beginning in m. 9. After a new harmonization of the main theme, moving through vi and V^7/V, Brahms presents a variation of the theme in which again the voice leading is exceptionally difficult to trace without aid of the score. Figure 11c shows a diagram of the voice-leading.

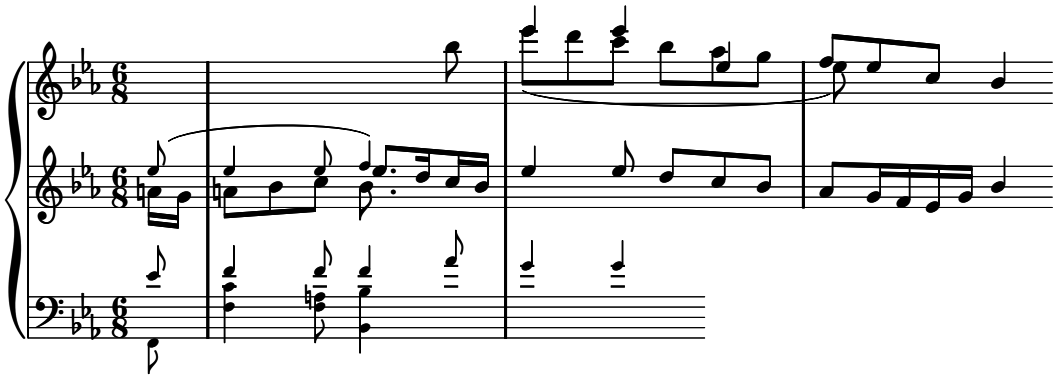


Figure 11c
Intermezzo in E-Flat Major, Opus 117, no.1
mm. 11-14

The alto voice is the lone thematic voice all the way to its ascent to E flat^2 in m. 12, from which it resolves downward while the upper voice begins a new statement of the theme. As the theme continues though, it is immediately

covered by E flat[3]. At this point, the listener might easily hear this new statement of the theme as the entire three-voice complex, as presented in the right hand at m. 1 and m. 9, transposed up an octave. Once again, the primary thematic voice is the inner voice ensconced within a tonic pedal doubled at the octave. However, the inner voice is not a continuation of the alto, which has resolved downward, becoming the lower of the three voices. If anything, it seems like a continuation of the soprano line, but it promptly descends into the original alto register and is covered by an upper voice that, for the first two quarter-notes of m. 13 at least, is the true soprano voice.

This passage is another example of polyphony that is open to a number of interpretations. In m. 13, where does the thematic inner voice in the right hand lead as it continues into m. 14? The diagram in Figure 11c is drawn from the beaming in Brahms's score. However, another likely interpretation is that the thematic line continues its stepwise descent through m. 14, as indicated in Figure 11d.

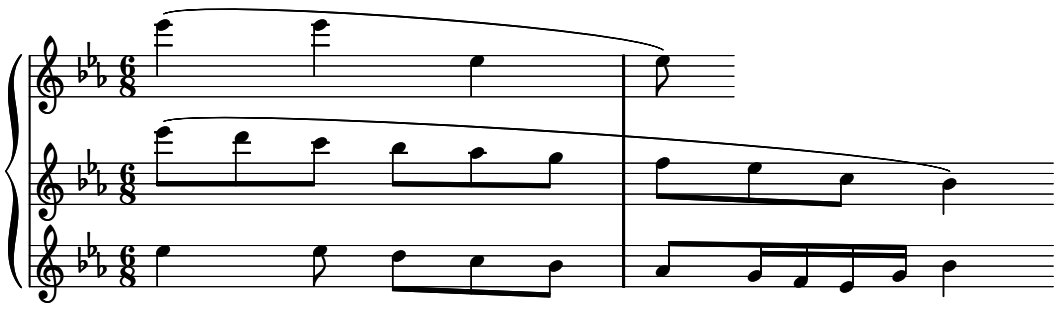


Figure 11d
Intermezzo in E Flat-Major, Opus 117, no. 1
mm. 13-14

We should keep in mind that in beaming compromises are often made for legibility. In this work, the density of the polyphony may have required Brahms to use beaming in some cases to indicate voice-leading (i.e. m. 1) and in others (i.e. m. 14) for legibility. In any case, with several strands disappearing at various points in these two measures and others entering within close proximity to existing voices, it will be anything but clear to the listener exactly where each strand begins and ends.

Mm. 38-57 [Figure 11e] are a varied reprise of the initial A section [mm. 1-20], as is typical of Brahms's late intermezzi, most of which are in ternary form. The pianistic texture is considerably reworked; Brahms revisits some of the ambiguities between parts from the opening A section. Mm. 42-45, for example, are a decorated version of mm. 5-8. Brahms indicates the separation of the voices more clearly in this version by separate stemming. The main difference in m. 43 is the embellished alto line. The melodic skeleton in this measure is identical to that in m. 6, but here it is much more difficult to hear the inner voice filigree as a continuation of the primary thematic material, whereas in m. 6 the alto clearly retained its thematic priority. The result is that the upper line is pushed more clearly into the foreground, and at an earlier point. Meanwhile, in mm. 50-51, which correspond to mm. 13-14, the individual lines maintain equality in a two-voice canonical passage.

The polyphonic passages I've discussed from the Intermezzo, Opus 117, no. 1, and the Romanze, Opus 118, no. 5 are examples of Brahms avoiding overall textural transparency in several respects. Multi-voiced textures are inherently less transparent than homophonic ones, where the listener can more easily separate the texture into foreground melody and background accompaniment. By embedding the melody into the accompaniment, under

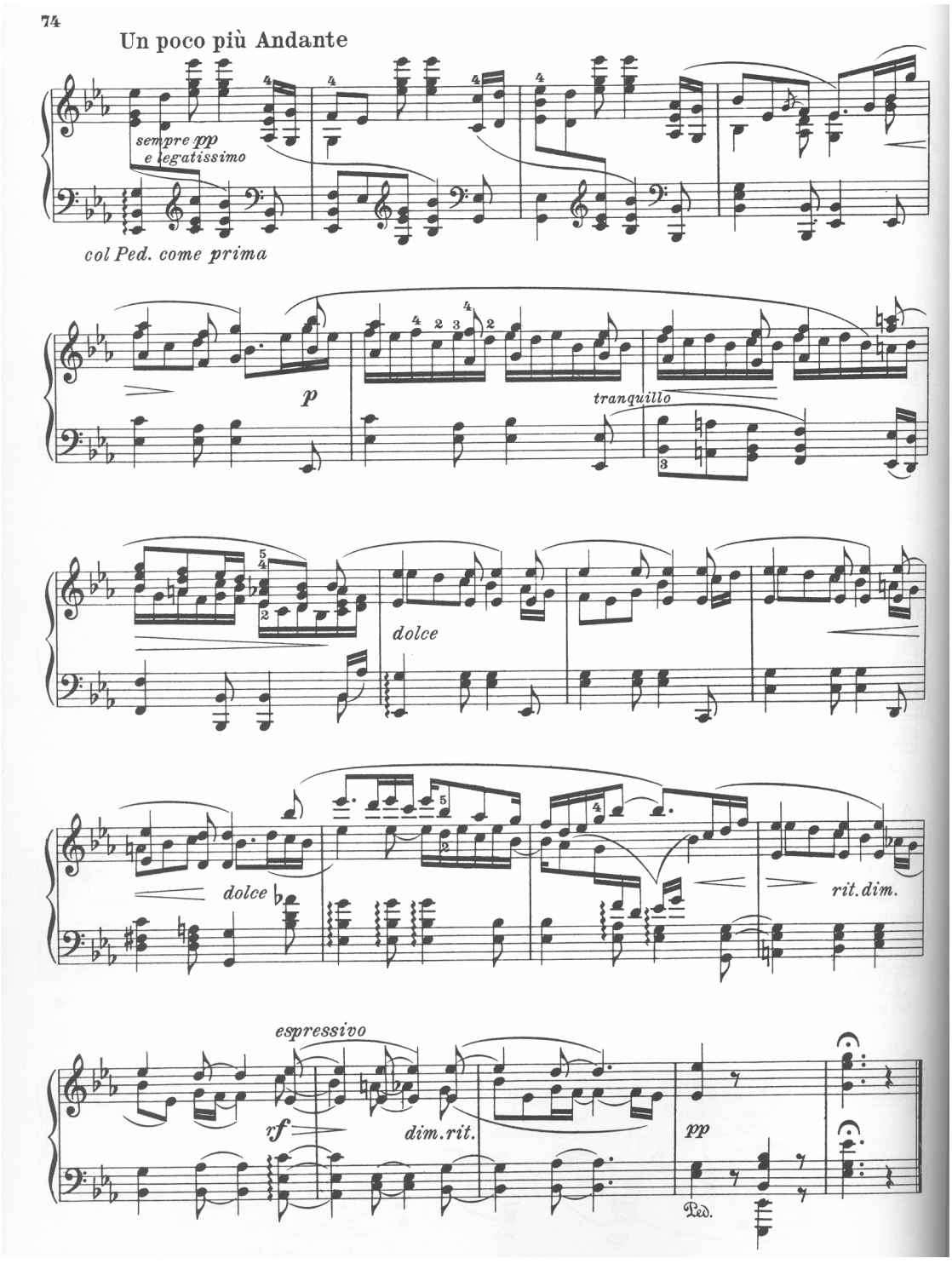


Figure 11e.
Intermezzo in E Flat Major, Opus 117, no.1
mm. 38-57

cover tones for example, rather than isolating it above the accompaniment, Brahms has already made a move towards a less transparent texture. The addition of one or more secondary melodic lines further complicates the task of dividing the texture into foreground and background elements, as secondary melodic lines compete with primary thematic lines for the listener's attention. The difficulty has been greatly amplified in these examples in that the hierarchy among the parts is unstable, with melodic primacy being passed among voices. By means of the frequent reordering of voices within the texture, and the difficulty in tracking the voice leading among emerging and receding lines, Brahms has defeated the easy apprehension of stable homophonic textures at every turn.

Entangling and disentangling lines

Such placing of the primary thematic material in inner voices covered by harmonic tones or subsidiary melodic lines is not Brahms's only method of submerging his melodic material into the accompaniment. There are numerous examples where melodic material grows out of accompanimental passagework. One example, referred to earlier, can be found in the F Sharp Minor Capriccio Opus 76, no. 1. In mm. 1-8 [Figure 6a], it is initially difficult to discern whether the rising lines that migrate up the keyboard between hands are melodic lines or accompanimental figures. As the figure passes into the right hand towards the end of each measure, though, each line terminates in a unique melodic gesture. After a few measures a clear melodic pattern is discernible. One can imagine a homophonic rescoring of this passage that

looks like Figure 12. However, rather than presenting a texture that is clearly divisible into separate parts, with a clear separation between melodic and accompanimental material, Brahms fuses two voices into one stream of notes; a stream that begins as something between melody and accompaniment but emerges as a strongly identifiable melody.

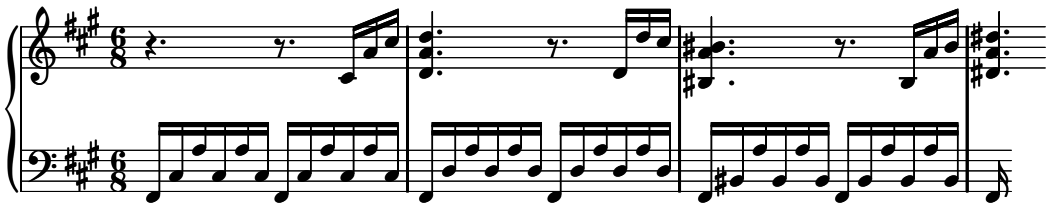


Figure 12
Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor, Opus 76, no.1
mm. 1-4

a. Variations on an Original Theme, in D Major, Opus 21, no. 1

The difference between this conjectural setting and Brahms's actual composition is exactly the difference brought into relief in Variations 1 and 2 of Brahms's Variations on an Original Theme, in D Major, Opus 21, no. 1 (1857). In Variation 1 [Figure 13a], as indicated by Brahms's stemming, the melody is embedded within the accompanying filigree, from which it emanates. This variation has a great deal in common with the *piu lento* in the B Minor *Ballade*. The melody is an inner voice and is part of the accompaniment figure, it is confined to a low tessitura and narrow overall compass, and the pianist is to play *pianissimo* with pedal. One can readily imagine that the marking *senza troppo marcare la melodi*a is also appropriate for this variation. Variation 2 [Figure 13b] is derived from Variation 1, but here the melody is isolated from

the accompaniment, and set above it. Furthermore, like the *Intermezzo*, Opus 117, no. 3, along with the melody moving out of the covering

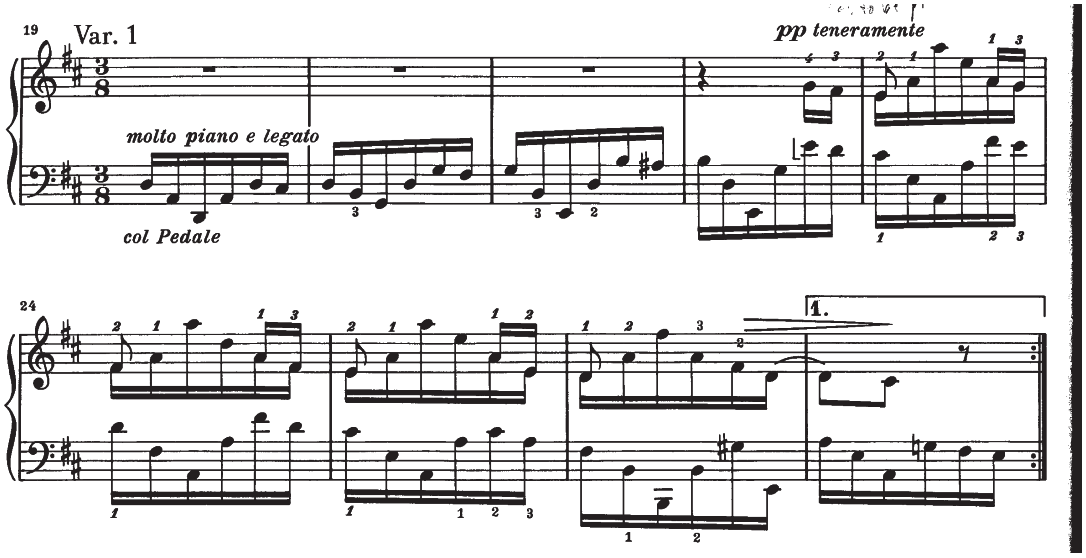


Figure 13a
Variations on an Original Theme in D Major, Opus 21, no. 1
Variation 1, mm. 19-27

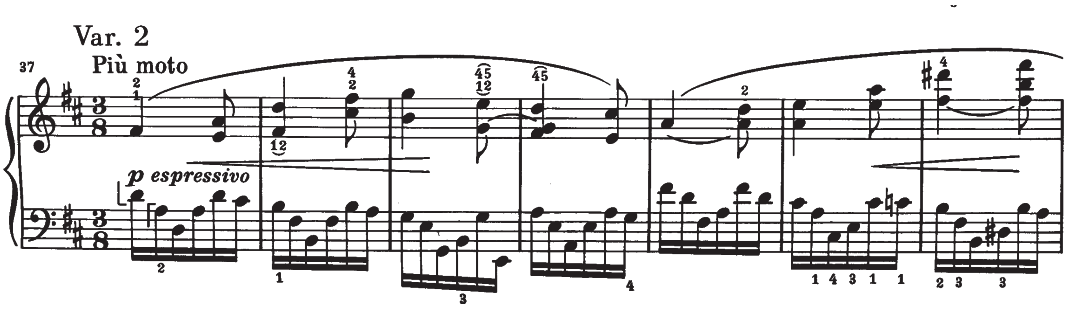


Figure 13b
Variations on an Original Theme in D Major, Opus 21, no. 1
Variation 2, mm. 37-43

shadow of its accompaniment is a breaking out of its registral confinement. The melody expands its compass high up into the treble register, where it will penetrate through the texture most distinctly.

The effect of this change is another example of the kind of fluctuations in melodic prominence that take place in the later piano works. Once again this is an interpretation that will have a direct bearing on the performance. If the pianist opts to delineate the melody with clarity in Variation 1, the effect of the textural transformation in Variation 2, with the sense of increased melodic presence, will be diminished. As ever, the pianist must be sensitive to Brahms's musical textures that do not invite clear separation of parts.

Of course melodic notes embedded into accompanimental figures are a common feature of nineteenth-century piano music, and can be found throughout the works of Mendelssohn, Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt, among others. The passage from the Liszt *B Minor Sonata* shown in Figure 14 is one representative example.

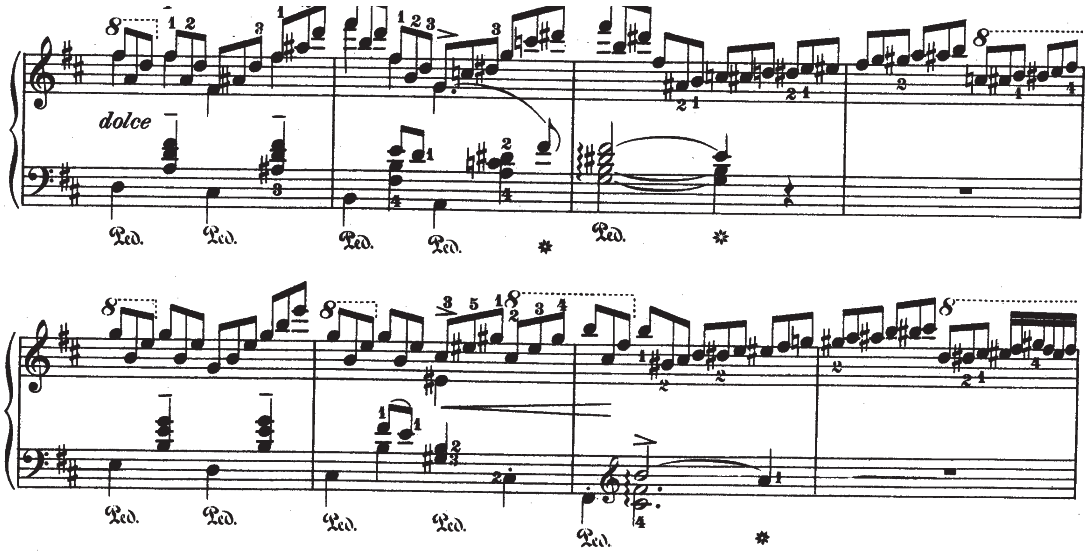


Figure 14.
Franz Liszt, Sonata in B Minor

What makes Brahms's use of this pianistic device distinctive is the degree to which he blurs the distinction between the melodic notes of the line and the harmonic notes. In the example from the Liszt Sonata, the non-thematic notes of the arpeggio are harmonic filler that create a lush and beautiful harmonic backdrop, from which the thematic notes are easily distinguished. The figurations in the right and left hands of the first variation of Brahms's Opus 21, no. 1, on the other hand, tread a thin line between being melodic in and of themselves and being a part of the harmonic backdrop.

b. The B Minor Intermezzo, Opus 119 no. 1

The B Minor *Intermezzo*, Opus 119 no. 1 [Figure 15], is one of the most striking examples of Brahms blurring the line between melody and accompaniment. As the opening chain of thirds gradually descends it seems that we are hearing one distinct melodic thread. It is only as the piece continues that we are able to discern a top voice, separate from the accompanimental voice. Although the right hand's upper voice is maintained through the first sixteen measures as the primary thematic voice, it is continually merging with the secondary line beneath it. For example, in m. 4 it is quite clearly a separate thematic voice, but in the following measure it sinks to b^1 on the last sixteenth note that is at the same time part of the continuing chain of thirds that comprises the secondary line; the note is stemmed upwards and downwards to show its double function.. The two lines merge into one another again in mm. 7-8 and in mm. 11 and 13. The ambiguity at the beginning of whether we are hearing one voice or two separate voices is maintained throughout these sixteen measures. At some points the separation

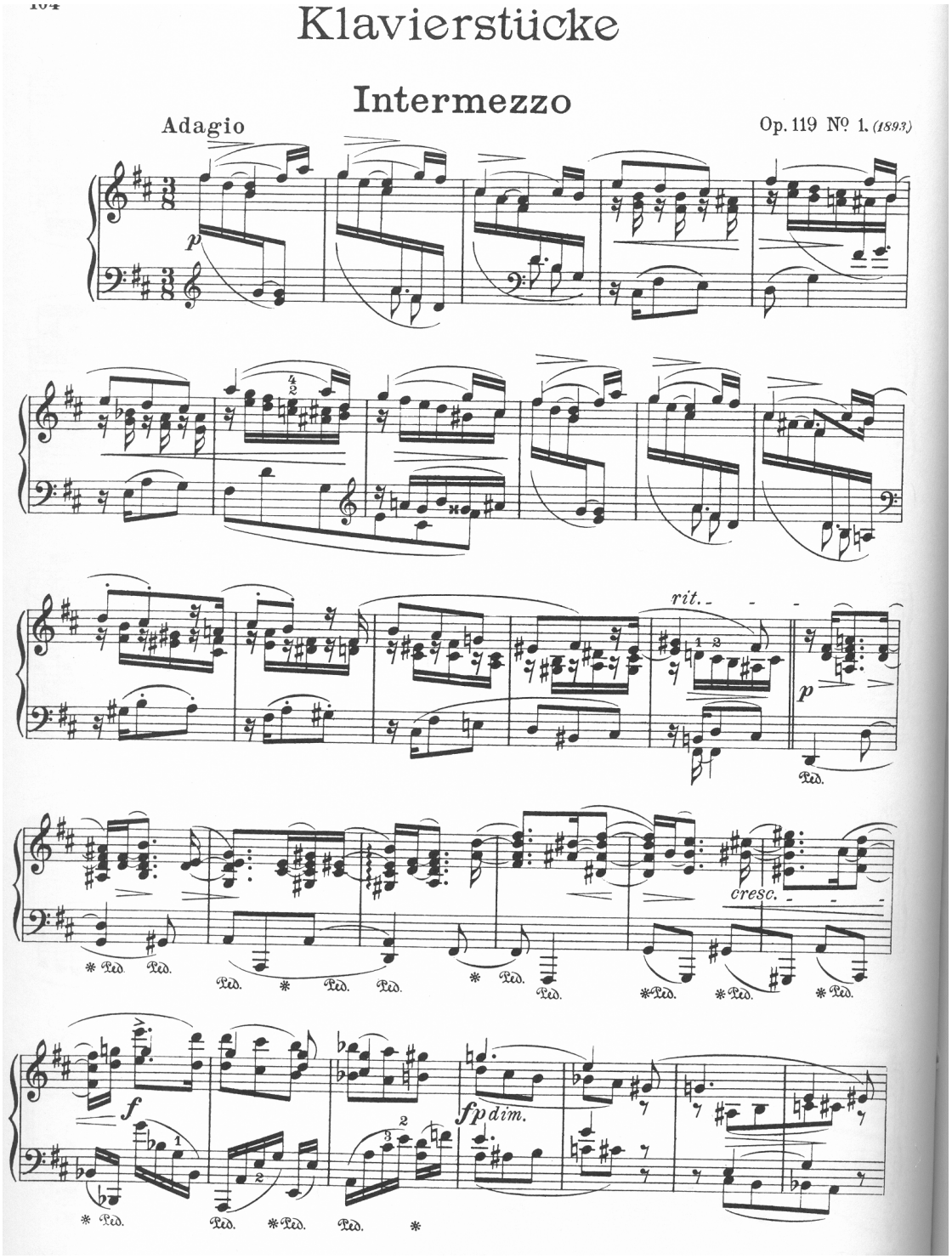


Figure 15
Intermezzo in B Minor, opus 119, no. 1
mm. 1-30

of the two voices in the right hand is quite clear, at other times it is dissolved. When the passage is revisited later in the piece [m. 47] the descending chain of thirds has been embellished to become even more of a true melodic thread though its function does not essentially change.

c. The A Major Intermezzo, Opus 76, no. 6

The A Major *Intermezzo*, Opus 76, no. 6, provides another example in which two individual voices are entangled into a single line, so that their separation is at certain times not audible. Figure 16a shows mm. 1-24, which constitute the initial A section of a ternary form. Figure 16b shows a diagram of the separation of the two voices in mm. 1-4. Nevertheless, through these measures the listener hears not two but one continuous strand in perpetual motion. These strands do not remain entwined within one another through the entire section; they are first split into two distinct voices at m. 5. The uniting of the two voices into a single strand and subsequent splitting into two separate voices, occurs three times in these first twenty-four measures: the second time at m. 8, and the third at m. 16. As in the B Minor *Intermezzo*, the entwining of separate voices serves to partially hide details of the composition from the listener.

Conclusion

The works discussed in this chapter illustrate many of the ways in which Brahms explored textural ambiguity in his piano music throughout his career. These examples show a relationship among a variety of techniques that together forms an essential facet of Brahms's idiosyncratic way of writing for

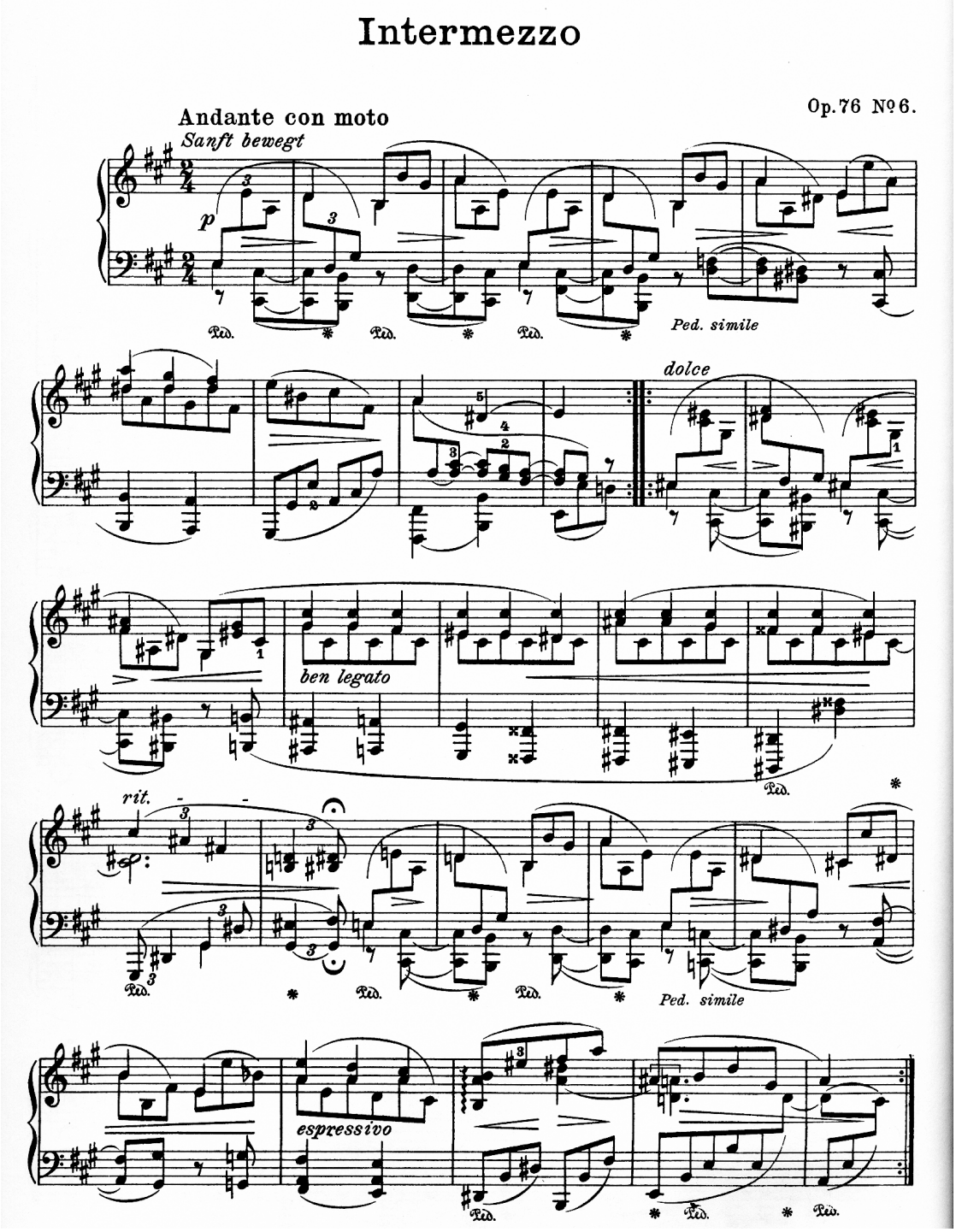


Figure 16a
Intermezzo in A Major, Opus 76, no. 6
mm. 1-24

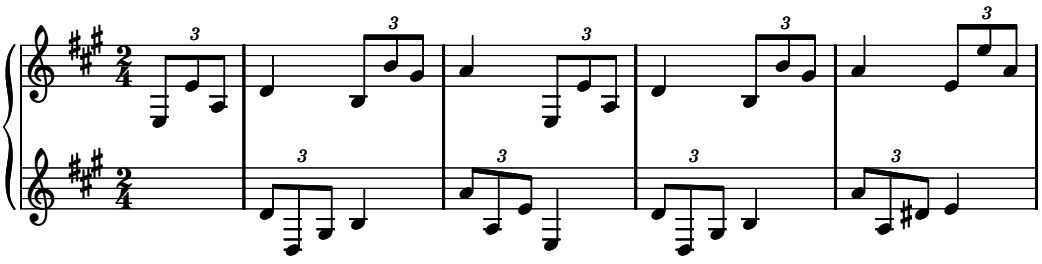


Figure 16b
Intermezzo in A Major, Opus 76, no. 6
mm. 1-4

the instrument. Brahms consistently wrote piano textures that resisted being separated into distinct layers with a clear and stable hierarchical order. So much of the melodic material in these examples is not etched out clearly into the foreground but rather partially hidden or veiled. This practice was a fundamental aspect of his characteristic textural ambiguity. He accomplished this through accompaniments that overpower the melodic voice and by utilizing the murky quality of the piano's lower register. He also accomplished this by blurring the line between melody and accompaniment; by embedding the melodic lines into the accompanimental figures, often to the point where it is temporarily not possible to distinguish between the two, and by submerging the melody within the texture, partially hidden underneath cover tones and subsidiary lines.

In several works, the separate parts that make up Brahms's unique polyphony do not disentangle themselves from one another. Particularly within his multi-voiced textures, like Opus 117, no. 1, and Opus 118, no. 5, it becomes very difficult to trace the progress of each individual part in the shifting and unpredictable tangle of voices. Within these textures individual

voices emerge and recede from the foreground, as the roles played by each voice, whether independent melodic lines or parallel voices offering harmonic support, are constantly changing.

Recognizing the aesthetic implications of these textural devices can significantly inform the way pianists perform these works. Control of the balance and the projection of melodic lines into the foreground is, after all, in the hands of the pianist. I contend that though in only one case did Brahms specifically ask for the melody to not be marked out too much, in much of his music the pianist would do well to adopt a like attitude towards the balance. The degree to which the melody is separated from the accompaniment, and the degree to which individual lines within multi-voiced textures are separated from each other, is something that pianists are constantly forced to come to decisions over. My contention is that one often better serves the true aesthetic of Brahms's piano writing by deliberately not separating the individual parts of a texture so as to create the least textural clarity possible. There are just as many cases in which Brahms has composed transparent, clear, and melodically focused sonorities. Rather than consistently optimizing Brahms's textures for clarity, through voicing and pedaling, pianists should work towards clarity only where the texture seems to be designed for it, and embrace the obscurity of his ambiguous textures as well. In many cases, it is this very contrast between clear and ambiguous textures that defines the dramatic structure of the work.

Chapter 2: Brahms and Nineteenth-Century Performance Practice: The Issue of Clarity Then and Now.

In recent years, a number of performance practice scholars writing on Brahms's piano music have commented on the prominence of low-lying melodic lines, thickly-written accompaniments, and dense saturation of the lower register.[1] For these writers these textural features constitute proof that Brahms could not have intended performance on the modern piano. Firms such as Steinway, Bechstein, and Chickering were manufacturing pianos by the early 1860's, roughly the midpoint of Brahms's life, that already exhibited most of the important design innovations that distinguish modern pianos from earlier ones, and enjoyed enormous success across Europe.[2] Performance practice scholars have argued that the increased power and slower decay of sound of these pianos create irreparable problems of balance and clarity in much of Brahms's music, implying that he was writing for the lighter and more transparent instruments that predate the modern piano, many of which were still manufactured up to the end of the century.

The view that low-lying melodies and densely spaced textures in the lower register present an undesirable muddiness on the modern piano was already being written about during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

1 See for example: Camilla Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," *Performance Practice Review* 2, no. 1 (1989): 58-72; Robert Pascall, *Playing Brahms: A Study in 19th-Century Performance*, vol. 1, *Papers in Musicology* (Nottingham, England: University of Nottingham, 1991); Robert Winter, "Orthodoxies, Paradoxes, and Contradictions: Performance Practices in Nineteenth-Century Piano Music," in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York: Schirmer, 1990): 16-54.

2 For comprehensive histories of piano making in the nineteenth century and beyond, see Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History*, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Edwin M Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

During the last decades of Brahms's life several treatises appeared elucidating the fundamental principles constituting the "modern school of pianoforte playing." Three treatises in particular, those by Hans Schmitt, Aleksandr Nikitsch Bukhotsev, and Adolph Christiani[3], promote melodic projection, transparency of sonority, and clear hierarchization of the texture through dynamic layering as basic ideals for piano playing. They provide numerous examples of piano textures ideally suited to achieving those ideals on the modern piano, and warn against other textures that result in harsh or muddy sonorities. In fact, their discussions of undesirable piano writing focus on issues of register and spacing that are often pointed to by modern scholars as proof of Brahms's expectations regarding the instrument.

These scholars presume that textural clarity was Brahms's intent and that Brahms would have agreed that such textures do indeed produce adverse and inartistic effects on the modern piano. In this chapter, I shall argue that this is simply not the case. In Chapter 1, I presented examples from his piano music in which avoiding melodic projection and textural clarity must be taken as an essential aspect of his aesthetic intent, and the source of a unique, evocative type of ambiguity. Although the same kind of textural ambiguity and predilection for the lower registers may be found in other genres in his oeuvre, particularly the vocal music and chamber music, in this thesis I confine the discussion to examples from his solo piano literature, in order to compare my remarks to these treatises whose discussion of musical

3 Aleksandr Nikitich Bukhotsev, *Guide to the Proper Use of the Pianoforte Pedals: With Examples out of the Historical Concerts of Anton Rubinstein*, (Leipzig: Bosworth, 1897); Adolph Christiani, *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing*, Reprint ed. (New York: Harper, 1974 [c1885]); Hans Schmitt, *The Pedals of the Piano-Forte and Their Relation to Piano-Forte Playing and the Teaching of Composition and Acoustics*, trans. Frederick S. Law (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1893).

clarity is directly linked to acoustic aspects of the piano itself. Considering Brahms's piano writing with regard to late-nineteenth-century writings and recognizing his cultivation of textural ambiguity leads to a reconsidering of the aesthetic implications of his textures, and suggests an understanding that is altogether different from interpretations that have been widely accepted in the performance practice literature.

Trends in piano composition by the end of Brahms's career

In order to understand the unique aesthetic problems that Brahms creates through textural ambiguity it is illuminating to compare his writing for the piano to ideas on playing and composing for the piano embraced by some of his contemporaries. Hans Schmitt's *The Pedals of the Piano-Forte and Their Relation to Pianoforte Playing and the Teaching of Composition and Acoustics* was published in 1893.[4] This was taken from a series of four lectures that Schmitt gave at the Conservatory of Music in Vienna; in Brahms's own backyard. In this book, Schmitt discusses "the modern use of the pedal," which he declares has "occasioned … a revolution in the manner of composing for the piano." (29)

Summing up the differences between his own and earlier generations of pianists, he declares,

> The importance to which the pedal has in our days attained can be appreciated when we consult the older piano schools. From what is to be seen in his Grand School for the Piano, [Johann Nepomuk] Hummel seems to have regarded the pedal mainly as a means of creating confusion. ... He seems never to have discovered how much the instrument gains in resonance by the use of the pedal, apparently holding it immaterial for beauty of tone whether, during a long tone, the pedal be used or not. (30)

4 Schmitt, *The Pedals of the Piano-Forte*.

It is clear that for Schmitt the beauty of the piano's sound rests in the richness of its resonance. Through lengthy discussions of the overtone series and the piano's capacity for sympathetic vibration he hopes to guide performers and composers in cultivating that richness. Not surprisingly, he holds the conviction that the piano sounds more beautiful when the pedal is used than when it is not used. According to Schmitt,

> because the pedal strengthens and beautifies the tone, it should be used with every single tone and chord whose duration is long enough to admit of the foot being lowered and raised during the same, whether the composer has indicated it or not. (42)

This emphasis on the pedaled sound is an important part of the shift in piano aesthetics between the early decades of the nineteenth century and the final decades. Interestingly, though he refers to "the older piano schools," (30) he makes no mention of differences between pianos at the end of nineteenth century and those at the beginning. Hummel, who died in 1837, did not live to see the iron-framed, cross-strung pianos that began to dominate the piano market by the early 1860's. The second chapter of Schmitt's book includes numerous musical examples designed to demonstrate the resonance gained

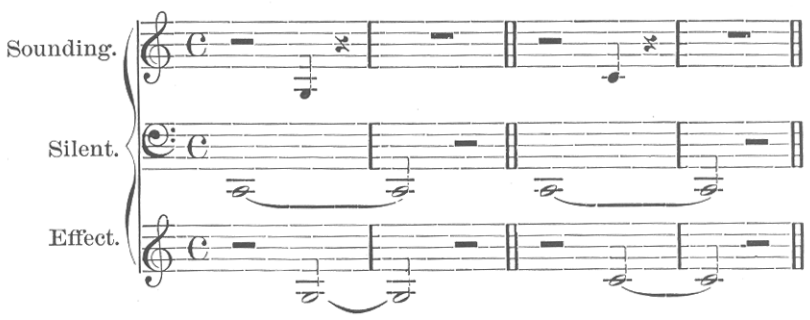


Figure 17.
Schmitt (33)

through sympathetic vibrations on the piano. Figure 17 shows one example by which Schmitt wishes to demonstrate sympathetic vibration on the piano.

To execute the example, Schmitt instructs, "press down the key of the large C without allowing it to sound, and then strike the small c above, strong and staccato, whereupon the tone c will sound clearly from the C string and be sustained as long as it is held down." (33) The significance of this demonstration would have been entirely lost on Hummel, for the simple reason that on the pianos that existed during his lifetime the after-ring from the silently held note would not have been very audible and would disappear quickly. Sympathetic vibrations did not contribute to the overall sound nearly as much as on the pianos that Schmitt was taking for granted, even with the dampers raised. It is hardly surprising that Hummel, unlike Schmitt, did not consider the damper pedal a basic tone-enhancing device. The piano tone that Schmitt is describing comes from substantial reverberations of sympathetic vibrations from the undamped strings. Virtually every design feature that distinguishes the later-nineteenth-century pianos contributes to maximizing those reverberations, whose effect on the tone is unlike that of any piano that Hummel might ever have heard.

Schmitt assesses the shift in aesthetics between earlier generation and his own,

> [s]peaking in general, it seems as though the history of music manifests changes similar to those in the history of painting. At certain epochs color was especially cultivated: in others, drawing enjoyed the pre-eminence. Our present music seems in particular to be characterized by a development of tone color. (28)

We can understand why he identified "the development of tone color" as the focus of his generation's "modern music" if we appreciate that this

generation experienced changes in instrument-making that offered richness and complexity of tone as a new resource, the creative potential of which had only begun to be explored. The pedaled sound of the late-nineteenth-century piano is an important example.

Schmitt's preference for the pedaled sound has considerable ramifications for what he considers to be ideal ways of writing for the piano. Though he considers the resonance and sustain of the piano to be its great virtues, at the same time he is eminently conscious of the obstacles they potentially present to textural clarity. Schmitt consistently promotes clarity of sonority as a fundamental artistic aim. Therefore, his ideal textures for the piano are those in which the pedal may be liberally used without fear of creating a muddy or indefinite sound. He describes various conditions in which the use of the pedal is dangerous or impossible, consistently relegating these types of piano texture to the "older school". He further claims that such textures are "disappearing from the music of today" because they do not permit the use of the pedal. (29)

Chief among the textures he considers problematic for using the pedal well are harmonic progressions where voices move by stepwise motion. He repeatedly associates polyphony with music of the past, particularly passages "made up equally of chord and scale passages" (29) and passages where inner voices contain notes either foreign to the harmony or sustained tones through harmonic changes. Indeed, he even claims that scales themselves have gone "out of vogue." (29) He also warns against including non-harmonic tones in arpeggiated figures unless they occur in places that permit a change of pedal, or if they appear in the treble register. (29-30) This outlook proceeds from a belief that the pedal should be changed with every harmonic change unless

it occurs in the upper register of the piano where the strings are undamped anyway. (20, 53)

> The use of the pedal in scale passages is least allowable when the tones move with but moderate rapidity and equal strength in the middle or lower portion of the piano; ... For this reason the pedal can very rarely be employed in the older polyphonic music, since it generally moves by regular steps of the scale … (55)

A major point of emphasis for Schmitt is the special handling required for the piano's middle to low registers, where the resonance of overtones is at its thickest. Aside from commenting on the dangers of scalar passages in the lower register, he emphasizes the need for spacing between chord members in order to create what he considers the ideal sonority on the piano.

> In the lower part of the instrument chords in extended positions sound much better than those in close positions. From acoustics we learn that in the nature of musical sounds a low, close position does not exist. (23)

Furthermore, he extends the need for spacing to arpeggios as well,

> It must also be remarked that arpeggios in close position taken with the pedal sound much worse on the lower part of the piano than in the middle or higher part. … The lower the pitch of the chords the less endurable becomes this holding of the pedal during changes of harmony, and on the very low keys even the close position of a broken chord played with the pedal sounds more or less false. (53)

Schmitt adds that the use of close-position chords or arpeggios, though a major impediment to clarity and purity of tone, is permissible when "such a mingling of tones is necessary in order to characterize the spirit of the composition." From his point of view, any deviation from optimal

textural clarity constitutes a kind of special effect, which, though perhaps not particularly beautiful, may be appropriate to certain kinds of expression. In his own words, "Where absolute beauty of tone can be disregarded, much can be allowed." (55) He names, for example, compositions of a "wild and gloomy character." (73)

Schmitt notes that, in certain cases, the "clear ring" of chords or melodies in the upper register may somewhat mitigate the "harsh" sound of close-position sonorities in the lower registers. (54) In other cases, he proposes that even scales, close-position arpeggios, and "ornamented chord passages" (56) may be pedaled through if "at any point one tone or chord be struck with great force." (58) The principle he promotes here is primarily a matter of focus. While unaccompanied close-position chords and scales sound "confused" and "dissonant", the overall sonority becomes acceptable to Schmitt when it is pulled into focus by clearly projected tones. In his words, "the strongest tone is, so to speak, the focus from which the tone-waves emerge, all the other tones being governed by it." (58)

The consequence of this emphasis on the necessity for elements that provide focus to the texture is that particular importance is attached to the clear presentation of the melody. Schmitt maintains that in some cases forcefully marking out melodic notes provides focus and clarity to textures that would otherwise sound unbearably dissonant.

According to Schmitt,

> [p]layers who have the skill to bring the melody out clearly soften many dissonances even without the pedal; the related tones blend with the melody, while the others fade away. (57)

Another contemporary publication, Alexander Nikitich Bukhovstev's *Guide to the Proper Use of the Pianoforte Pedals* (1897),[5] transmits many of the same notions. Like Schmitt, Bukhotsev associates polyphonic music with older generations and urges special consideration of the middle to lower registers of the piano.

> The pedal can be used only very sparingly in older polyphonic works, and then only for a short time, because these works are played principally in a moderate tempo, are written for the middle portion of the pianoforte, and contain comparatively few harmonic figures. (25)

He also especially warns against close-positioned sonorities, except in cases "where the effect of a rustle or noise is intended." (26)

> The pedal always sounds unclear when used with harmonic figures in close position in the lower portion of the pianoforte, however well the instrument may be in tune. The reason is that the over and under tones assert themselves strongly in this part of the pianoforte. (33)

Bukhotsev's discussion of the half-pedal makes note of another textural requirement for clarity of sonority in piano music: the separation of the bass line from the rest of the texture. He claims, "[t]he use of the half pedal is successful in proportion to the depth of the bass note, its distance from the other voices, and the strength with which it is struck.[6] In certain cases he allows that a half-pedal can be held through changes of harmony occurring above a sustained bass note, but only "if no particular clearness and precision of tone are required; but if, contrary to the highest artistic claims, a certain mist-like, cloudy, or indefinite effect is to be produced." (36)

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5 Aleksandr Nikitich Bukhotsev, *Guide to the Proper Use of the Pianoforte Pedals.*
6 *Ibid*., 36.

This passage is revealing in that it equates "the highest artistic claims" with clarity. Both Schmitt and Bukhotsev emphasize avoiding close-position sonorities because of the more pronounced "mingling of tones"[7] resulting from sympathetic vibration. Both also note that playing the bass and/or the melody more strongly can mitigate the effect. From this it is evident that hierarchization of the texture through dynamic contrast, what pianists call "voicing", was an important feature of the "modern" piano playing style being promoted by these treatises, and that it was directly related to the increased overtones and resonance of the late-nineteenth-century piano.

Another treatise from the period, Adolph Christiani's *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing* (1885),[8] illustrates how important clear hierarchization of texture was to some of Brahms's contemporaries. Christiani declares,

> the real sphere for pianoforte music is certainly 'polyphony.' Polyphony is the proper domain of the pianist in which he is supreme, and in which no other instrumentalist, not even the organist, can compare with him. (222)

The reason for this, according to Christiani, is the "judiciousness of touch" (222) — dynamic contrast, possible on the piano but not on the organ or harpsichord. This type of polyphony is different than the "older polyphonic style" referred to in the other treatises cited. It is one in which the separate layers of the texture are kept distinct and in a clear hierarchical order through dynamic contrast, rather than one characterized by equal scalar activity (melodic interest) in multiple voices, possibly sharing the same register.

A fundamental aspect of Christiani's ideal handling of texture is the

7 Schmitt, *The Pedals of the Piano-Forte*, 55.
8 Christiani, *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing*. Christiani was a student of Franz Liszt.

clear division between melody and accompaniment and the audibility of that division to the listener. Whereas Christiani asserts that the melody "invariably demands primary power", (223) accompaniments, on the other hand, "have no dynamic rank at all, excepting a negative one, that of being least important." (242) In fact, he claims,

> No passage or embellishment around a canto can ever be in good taste or of good effect, unless they are played in subdued proportion to the melody. They should be transparent as trelliswork, delicate as arabesques, —an ornament, not an encumbrance. This is a maxim universally accepted, the gist of which holds always good, even in fortissimo playing. (225)

Within the section on "the Dynamics of Melody", Christiani includes a subsection called "Not Plainly Discernible Melodies," dealing with cases where the melody is "doubtful or hidden." (224) Referring to textures in which the melody is interwoven into the accompanimental fabric as opposed to isolated from it, Christiani declares,

> its discernment assumes the proportion of an intellectual task which to solve correctly not every pianist is sufficiently thoughtful or capable. (224)

Christiani's stance on the aesthetics of textural ambiguity is interesting in that he views a composer's obscuring of melody as a challenge for the pianist to solve and, in a sense, eradicate for the listener. Rather than presenting a texture in which the identity and primacy of a thematic line is somewhat in question, he requires the pianist to come to decide which is the primary thematic line and make sure it is distinct from the rest of the texture. As for textures in which two or more true melodic threads exist simultaneously, calling into question the hierarchy of parts, Christiani urges

the pianist to impose a hierarchy on the texture and be sure that it is clearly audible to the listener,

> The importance of deciding which of two simultaneous melodies is the principal one can hardly be overrated; and the necessity of bringing this perception clearly before the listener, must be evident to every one. (237)

The kind of textural clarity called for in these treatises depends on practical considerations of acoustic transparency for the purpose of presenting music that is conceptually clear, facilitating a kind of cognitive transparency. Thus, there is a specific aesthetic outlook underlying the practical advice offered by these authors. Their estimation of the listener's capacity to enjoy the music is linked to their estimation of the listener's capacity to clearly apprehend it. Careful handling of the lower registers, and avoidance of close-spacing and frequent non-harmonic tones, are acoustic strategies for taking advantage of the richness of the piano's pedaled sound without leading to a mass of sound that might confuse or disorient the listener. Hierarchization of the texture, likewise, leads to a more "penetrable" sonority, and so it is to some extent a practical consideration. By selectively foregrounding only part of the texture, for instance just one melodic voice, and subordinating the rest, the pianist can minimize the buildup of sound allowing greater overall clarity. At the same time though, this hierarchization is a way to draw clear boundaries separating the various components of a texture, and to clearly define the role and importance of each separate part. The music is thus packaged in a way that is conceptually clearer for the listener to grasp.

Brahms and textural ambiguity

Questions of balance and thematic primacy remain among the most notorious problems confronting performers of Brahms's music. Evidence of Brahms's own views on these issues is scarce, but there are some hints available from his letters and from recollections by contemporaries. In one case, the String Quintet in G Major, Opus 111, the difficulties in balance and melodic projection caused much consternation for the performers premiering the work, leading to an exchange between Brahms and Joseph Joachim.[9] The cellist premiering the work, Reinhold Hummer, complained that his opening solo could not be heard properly because it was set underneath four other string lines, all playing sixteenth notes *sempre forte*. Turning to Joachim for advice on this passage, Brahms complains of his contemporaries' tendency to underplay accompaniments, "Now here, [i.e., in Vienna] in my opinion, one is all too accustomed to accompanying every solo ***p***."[10]

Ultimately, the passage proved troublesome not only for the players but also for Brahms himself. He did not acquiesce in Hummer's opinion that the upper strings should play the accompaniment *piano*, but still felt "the proper sound wasn't achieved either."[11] Annoyed, he dismissed the whole problem saying, "Forgive me, but this trivial point was quite irksome to me."[12] He did however, along with Joachim's help arrive at a solution: the accompanying strings would play *forte* until the entrance of the cello, at which point they

9 My information on this affair is drawn from Styra Avins, "Performing Brahms's Music: Clues from His Letters," in *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performing Style*, ed. Michael Musgrave and Bernard Sherman, *Musical Performance and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30-34. See also, Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, 674-678.
10 Avins, "Performing Brahms's Music: Clues from His Letters," 30.
11 *Ibid*., 30.
12 Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters,* 676.

would drop down to *mezzo-forte*. Donald Francis Tovey, who was present for the Joachim Quartet's London premiere of the work, claims there was no problem in balance at this performance. "I distinctly remember that there was no difficulty in hearing the violoncello with its theme in the lowest brass under the Niagara of sound in the other four high-lying instruments, who seemed to me to be 'letting themselves go' without scruple."[13]

Tovey also relates a humorous anecdote of Brahms playing the F Major Cello Sonata, Opus 99, with "a cellist of no great promise or accomplishment." Brahms "accordingly opened the throttle of the pianoforte and let her rip and roar. The cellist's voice penetrated the din with the complaint, 'Master, I can't hear myself at all' — and Brahms barked back at him, 'Lucky for you.'" (261) Though the story was meant to convey Brahms's famous sarcasm, it gives another example of his obstinance with regard to a solo line being engulfed by a "Niagara" of an accompaniment.

Tovey, in the case of the G Major Violin Sonata, Opus 78, also admonishes against over-projecting the melody. Pointing to the beginning of the development section [Figure 18], where the violin's rolled chords accompany the *piano* theme in the treble of the piano, Tovey caricatures tendencies among his contemporaries to over-project the piano's theme and pay too little attention to the sound of the accompaniment.

> [Brahms] did not anticipate a time when violinists, who would harp this passage like angels if they thought it part of a popular piece of musical cookery, could think that classical chastity compelled them to tighten these chords into dry clicks while the pianist, in a burst of 'noble manliness without sentiment', uses six times the tone that Brahms requires for his ethereal melody over its distant bass. (235-6)

13 Tovey, Donald Francis. "Brahms's Chamber Music." In *Essays and Lectures on Music*, edited by Hubert Foss. London: Oxford University Press, 1949, 265.

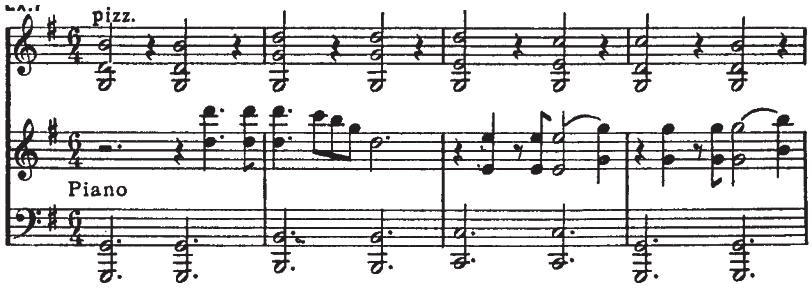

Figure 18.
Violin Sonata in G Major, Opus 78
Development

Did Brahms set the opening themes in the G Major Quintet and the F Major Cello Sonata underneath their accompaniments because he didn't want them to project as clearly as they might have in an upper voice? Brahms himself alludes to his own predilection for low-lying vocal lines in an 1857 letter to Julius Otto Grimm,

> What can be done with the impossible alto part in my sacred things? I had got myself so enmeshed in my passion for low alto, without considering that they aren't around anymore.[14]

If Brahms was sometimes reluctant to over-project his melodic lines, he was also often reluctant to push his accompaniments wholly into the background. Gustav Jenner, Brahms's only real composition student, relates how Brahms was "not one to be impressed by ... complicated or 'atmospheric' accompaniments."[15] Speaking of vocal music, Jenner recalls Brahms's disdain for composers hiding a "pitiful, shabby" compositional idea behind the "sumptuous and glittering cloak" of a merely decorative accompaniment. On the contrary, Brahms "loved to elevate the accompaniment to a fully equal,

14 *Ibid*., 154.

15 Gustav Jenner, *Johannes Brahms as Man, Teacher, and Artist*, ed. Walter Frisch, trans. Susan Gillespie, *Brahms and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 199.

even independent, element and sometimes to move it canonically in relation to the voice." (199-200)

Therefore, it is not surprising that a first-hand account of Brahms's manner of accompanying singers emphasizes his tendency to elevate the piano part to an unusually prominent role.

> Brahms never accompanied in the manner to which we are accustomed today [1945]. Accompanists of great singers perform in the same manner as lackeys laying a carpet at the feet of their mistresses. They are in the background, obsequious and bending to the whims of the artist and never step forward to attract attention. But not Brahms… The singer was not the main feature, the song was important, and both singer and pianist worked toward the same goal… Brahms's accompaniments had a strong foundation of basses, even in sweet songs like the Wiegenlied, the accompaniment of which is usually sublimated and pampering. Brahms himself always used firmness in the basses… his hand was somewhat heavy.[16]

These recollections suggest that Brahms had ideals of sonority and dynamic balance that were altogether different from the kind of textural clarity espoused by late-nineteenth-century writers on piano performance and composition, as cited above. Though the quotations from Brahms and his acquaintances are not specifically concerned with solo piano music, they do give some idea of his general attitude towards the relationship between melody and accompaniments. Moreover, his piano music provides countless examples demonstrating the kind of writing for the instrument that nineteenth-century treatises recommend avoiding, in the interest of foregrounding the melody. In Chapter 1 I have cited numerous examples demonstrating close-positioned chords in the lower registers, stepwise motion in the middle to lower registers where change of pedal at each semitone is

16 Michael Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader* (New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 135-36

not possible, and textures where the boundaries separating melodic lines from the accompaniment are somewhat blurred. The thick rolled chords in Variation 13 of his Opus 24 Variations,[17] for example, are precisely the kind of sonority that Schmitt would characterize as harsh. The swiftly moving chromatic line in the C Sharp Minor Capriccio, opus 76, no.5,[18] is a prime example of stepwise motion in the lower register that ensures that semitones will be mingled where the pedal is used. The B Minor Ballade, Opus 10, no.4,[19] and the B Minor Intermezzo, Opus 119, no.1,[20] provide examples where the boundaries separating melody and accompaniment are blurred. Furthermore, my discussion of the intricate polyphonic textures in the F Major Romanze, Opus 118, no.5, and the E Flat Major Intermezzo, Opus 117, no.1,[21] shows the problems often inherent in attempting to use voicing of the type recommended by Christiani to maintain a clear sense of hierarchy among simultaneous melodic lines in Brahms's piano music.

Brahms's expectations regarding instrument: prevailing assumptions.

One of the central concerns of performers on historical pianos has been issues of balance and pedaling, and their possible relation to the greater transparency of the various kinds of pianos built in the first half of the nineteenth century, as compared to the modern piano [22] Writing in reference to a recording of Beethoven sonatas for cello and piano by Anner Bylsma and

17 Chapter 1, Figure 2.
18 Chapter 1, Figure 3a.
19 Chapter 1, Figure 1.
20 Chapter 1, Figure 15.
21 Chapter 1, Figure 11a.
22 See for example Bernard Sherman's interview with Malcolm Bilson in Bernard Sherman, *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 297-314.

Malcolm Bilson,[23] Bernard Sherman concludes that "[t]he period instruments solve balance problems that modern pianos create in these works, making it clear that Beethoven would have written the piano parts differently for a modern grand."[24] It is true of all pianos from the first half of the nineteenth century, albeit to varying degrees, that the tone is clearer and decays more quickly than on the modern piano. Because of this difference, performers using period pianos have cited numerous examples where accompaniments that on a modern piano might threaten to create a confusing mass of sound, obscuring the melody, present no such problem on a period piano. Sherman's remark epitomizes a belief held by many who perform on period pianos. The references in treatises cited above to an older polyphonic keyboard style, no longer in use because of problems of textural clarity, support the belief that the greater resonance and sustain of later-nineteenth-century pianos did affect the way composer handled issues of register and chord spacing in piano music.

The premise that Brahms wrote piano textures designed specifically for lighter mid-nineteenth-century instruments, because the modern piano's resonance transforms what should be clear textures into something thick and impenetrable, has dominated approaches to performance practice scholarship for his piano music. For decades, scholars have maintained that his handling of the bass register was largely determined by his "strong leanings"[25] towards the more conservative mid-century Viennese pianos, and therefore "need[s] to be understood in respect to [their] capabilities."[26] Brahms owned a piano by Johann Baptist Streicher (circa 1868), given to him in 1872 and kept in his

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23 *Beethoven: Sonatas for Fortepiano and Cello*, vols. I & II, Malcolm Bilson and Anner Bylsma (Nonesuch CD#79152, 1992).
24 Sherman, *Inside Early Music*, 313.
25 Cai, "Brahms's Pianos," 59.
26 *Ibid*., 62.

Vienna flat until the end of his life. This piano, like pianos from the first half of the century, did not have the cross-stringing, one-piece cast-iron frame, or the heavy, rigid case found on Steinway-type pianos from the early 1860's to the present day, and so would indeed have had a quicker decay and a more transparent tone. As with early-nineteenth-century performance practice, scholars have emphasized the difference between straight- and cross-strung pianos because of the latter's more complex overtone pattern in the lower registers. For Robert Winter, the difference is so crucial as to disqualify cross-strung instruments as "appropriate" for Brahms's piano music.

> The introduction of cross- or overstringing in the 1850's led to characteristics of the piano bass that are equally at cross-purposes with Romantic piano literature. On a piano where many tones generally sound at once, the distinctness of individual tones is the tradeoff for greater sustaining power.[27]

Winter goes so far as to argue that the technical innovations of the Steinway piano, emulated to varying degrees by rival piano makers until their eventual standardization, represent a "fatal blow" to the aesthetic premises of nineteenth-century piano works:

> How, we must ask ourselves, can we celebrate the varieties of color in nineteenth-century piano music when the instruments themselves have been purged of so much of that color?[28]

Numerous other scholars have likewise presumed that Brahms's thickly-written piano textures imply the clarity offered by straight-strung instruments. Edwin Good, for example, writes,

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27 Winter, "Orthodoxies, Paradoxes, and Contradictions: Performance Practices in Nineteenth-Century Piano Music," 37.
28 *Ibid*., 30

> on an instrument like the Streicher, Brahms's music comes cleaner and clearer, the thick textures we associate with his work, the sometimes muddy chords in the bass and the occasionally woolly sonorities, lightened. Those textures, then, are not a fault of Brahms's piano composition.[29]

A similar conclusion is drawn by Camilla Cai,

> One of the most common complaints about Brahms's music ... concerns the thickness or "muddiness" of Brahms's bass parts.... However, the sound of the conservative German or Austrian piano from the second half of the nineteenth century supports the conclusion that this particular concern may not have existed for Brahms.[30]

Robert Pascall also invokes this idea in reference to Brahms's chamber music including piano:

> It is sometimes claimed that Brahms' piano parts in his chamber music works are over-written; but this judgment, as we can now appreciate, is a modern error.[31]

These writers agree that to perform Brahms's piano music on the modern grand is to misrepresent it,

> Convincing performances of many of the late character pieces face serious obstacles on our modern instrument, for example, the opening of one of the most atmospheric, Brahms's Intermezzo in E flat minor, op 118, no 6. No modern pianist can hope to replicate Brahms's distant, disembodied (*but clear*!) bass response to the plaintive solo opening.[32] (Italics mine)

Instead, Winter claims, we should use instruments that represent "the

29 Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos*, 239.
30 Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," 67.
31 Pascall, *Playing Brahms: A Study in 19th-Century Performance*, 10.
32 Winter, "Orthodoxies, Paradoxes, and Contradictions: Performance Practices in Nineteenth-Century Piano Music," 33.

sound quality he was most used to and preferred"[33], a "sound ideal clearly different from the one now accepted in the 20th century."(9)

All of these arguments rest on an assumption about Brahms's intentions textural clarity, specifically with regard to the melody being clearly audible. For example, Cai writes, "The textures Brahms chooses for the late piano pieces ... reveal his clarity of intent to produce a defined, balanced piano sound."[34] A "defined, balanced" texture, in this context, would appear to mean one that is balanced so that all parts are easily apprehensible, where the accompanimental parts do not interfere with the projection of the main melodic lines. For Cai, the clear delineation of melodic material is *a priori* an important objective in Brahms's piano writing. She asserts that "the problem of delineating [Brahms's] middle-range melodies lies not just with the pianist", but with the modern piano.

> On the pianos of Brahms's time ... the distinctive middle range — particularly around and below middle C— sounds full, mellow, and prominent, and it easily dominates the treble and bass ranges. Brahms undoubtedly heard this middle area as the richest on the piano, and therefore chose to exploit it in his piano pieces.[35]

By contrast, my contention is that Brahms often sets melodies in this register precisely because he does not want them to be distinct from the accompaniment, but rather intends for them to sound covered, muted, or "veiled". The examples in Chapter 1 demonstrate that the low tessitura is one part of a constellation of compositional devices by which he undermines delineation of melody. The assertion that he used tenor-range melodies such as those encountered in the C Sharp Minor Capriccio, and variation

33 *Ibid*., 9.
34 *Ibid*., 62.
35 Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," 66.

13 from Opus 24, because he believed this was the register in which they project most clearly is dubious. In the Capriccio, were pianists to thin out the accompaniment in the opening measures, and project the melodic line, they would to a certain extent eradicate the contrast between the initially ambiguous textures and their subsequent clarification, on which the dramatic thrust of the work is based. If one is sensitive to the way Brahms uses register, chord-spacing, and the overall density of the accompaniment, even without such directions one can recognize when he doesn't intend melodic clarity.

Furthermore, one might ask exactly which pianos Cai is referring to when she invokes "the pianos of Brahms's time". She gives the impression that the modern-type piano was not a piano "of Brahms's time"; but, instruments very much like those that are standard today had begun to dominate the European piano market by the early 1860's,[36] Assuming that Cai is referring to pianos like those of Erard and Streicher, which predate the Steinway but would soon become contemporary rivals, her characterizations of both these and modern grand pianos are inaccurate. One of the fundamental differences between the modern grand and the pianos of the 1850's and '60's is its concentrated tone and greater capacity for projecting individual lines. In fact, it is far easier to make an individual voice shine out above the rest of the texture on a Steinway than on any other piano in history; indeed, this is one of its great strengths. Its countervailing weakness is that because of its slow decaying tone and complex overtone pattern one is forced to underplay

36 The London exhibition of 1862 was a widely publicized success for the American firms of Steinway and Chickering and led to imitation of their pianos by many important European firms. This includes Johann Baptist Streicher who won a medal at the 1867 Paris exhibition for an instrument that was essentially an exact replica of American instruments shown at the 1862 exhibition. Ludwig Bösendorfer followed suit and exhibited a cross-strung iron-framed piano of his own at the 1873 exhibition in Vienna. See Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History*, 56-62. Also 214-219.

background material, and consciously project melodic lines for audibility, to an extent that had never been necessary before. The great strength of a more transparent piano, like an 1860's Streicher or Erard, is that one can play all the voices at a more equal dynamic level without sacrificing the distinctness of any individual part. These pianos do not have the concentrated tone with which to project any single melodic voice as distinctly as the modern-type piano can, but their overall transparency makes this kind of voicing unnecessary. It is true that the fundamental pitches in the tenor register are clearer on the earlier pianos; however, on either type the treble register has the brightest and most piercing sound, and is usually the most easily heard, despite not producing as much volume as the lower registers.

The diversity of pianos in the second half of the nineteenth century.

A fundamental objective in the pursuit of historically-informed performance has long been to seek out and perform on instruments that the composer is known to have used and admired, as well as the instruments in general use during the composer's lifetime. In the case of Brahms, this yields a long and diverse list that includes numerous pianos that predate the modern grand as well as modern pianos. Presented with this complex situation, Brahms performance practice scholars have attempted to narrow the list of "appropriate" pianos (1) through conjectural links between the music and specific characteristics of certain pianos, and (2) by using historical research to ascertain Brahms's personal inclinations and/or the general state of piano manufacture during his lifetime. In the first case, this has led to the dubious interpretations of Brahms's piano writing discussed above. In the

second it has led to equally dubious historical investigations, characterized by a selective marshaling of evidence and shocking disregard for obvious contradictions. The possibility of challenging mainstream performance culture is an attractive prospect, as evidenced by the dramatic impact of the period instrument revolution on performance today. However, the particular set of problems surrounding historical performance studies of Brahms, and the late-nineteenth-century performance culture of his contemporaries, cannot be satisfactorily confronted by such a prejudiced historical approach.

Brahms, like all pianists who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century, played on a great variety of instruments.[37] The list of instruments he is known to have owned, practiced on, and performed on includes straight-strung, wooden-framed instruments such as those by Graf, Erard, and Bösendorfer, as well as later modern-type instruments by Steinway, Ehrbar, Bechstein, and Bösendorfer. Scholars have attached special importance to the pianos of Streicher, one of which he owned, and he is known to have concertized with and expressed admiration for those instruments. For example, an 1870 letter to Frederick Gernsheim states, "Frau Schumann, Hiller, and my worthless self play Streichers."[38] As for his feelings towards these pianos, a letter from 1873 to his friend Adolf Schubring, the critic, states, "I consider Streicher to be good and reliable [...] I like them quite a lot in a room, and for myself, even now, cannot get used to the local grand pianos in the concert halls."[39] Nevertheless, his last public performance on a Streicher

37 For a comprehensive overview of the pianos Brahms played during his lifetime see George Bozarth and Stephen H. Brady, "The Pianos of Johannes Brahms," in *Brahms and His World*, ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

38 Published in Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters,* 417.

39 Quoted in Styra Avins, "Performing Brahms's Music: Clues from His Letters," in *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performing Style*, ed. Michael Musgrave and Bernard Sherman, *Musical Performance and Reception*

seems to have been in 1880.[40] Styra Avins has pointed out that Brahms's letters consistently reveal admiration for modern Steinways and Bechsteins. In fact, he made efforts on numerous occasions to secure either one or the other for public performances.[41] The documentary evidence provides no example of his expressing dissatisfaction with the continuous changes in piano making occurring during his lifetime, nor does it provide any example of Brahms expressing concern for the inappropriateness of any of the myriad pianos he might have encountered for his music.

As for the pianos used by important nineteenth-century interpreters of Brahms's music, the list is once again diverse. Hans von Bülow, one of the century's most distinguished piano virtuosos, who worked closely with the composer on numerous occasions, championed the Bechstein piano from its earliest days, even advising the firm on its design. Clara Schumann, undeniably one of the most important early interpreters of Brahms's piano music, became enamored with an over-strung, iron framed piano during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Figure 19 shows the Grotrian-Steinweg grand that she bought in 1879 and kept to the end of her life.

Like the Bechstein pianos favored by Bülow, this piano shares many features with the Steinways of today, including the *strahl-förmige Rasten*: ray-like supporting beams on the underside of the piano, as found on many modern pianos. Both Bülow and Schumann, however, rose to prominence as touring virtuosi decades before modern-type instruments such as those they

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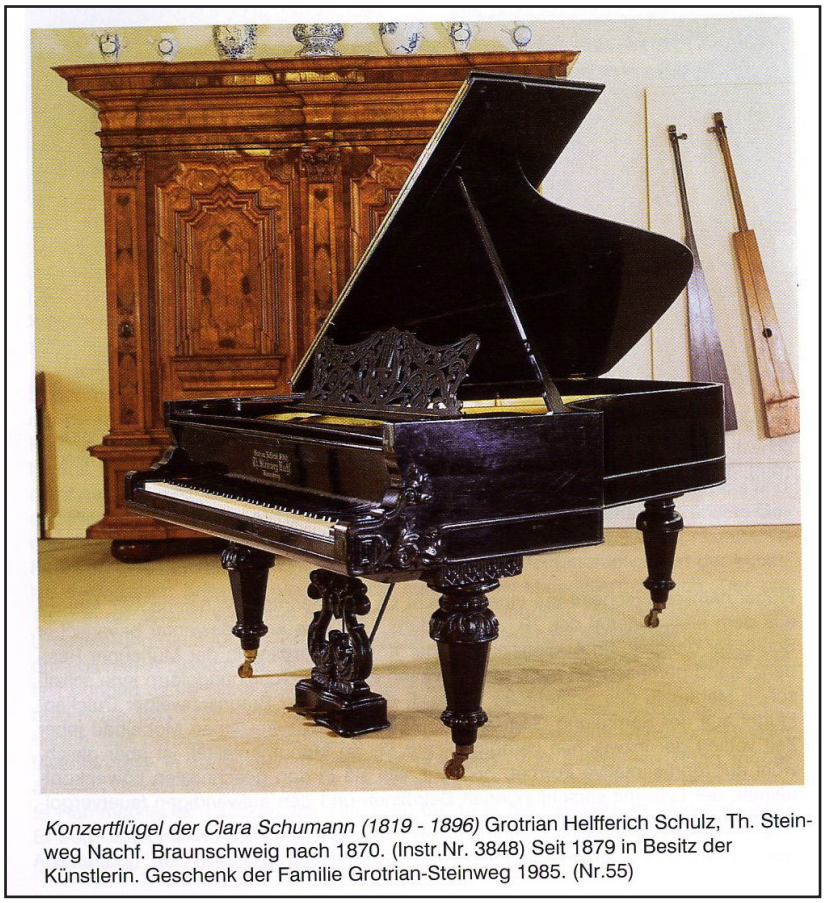
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.

40 George Bozarth and Stephen H. Brady, "The Pianos of Johannes Brahms," in *Brahms and His World*, ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 58.

41 Styra Avins, "Performing Brahms's Music: Clues from His Letters," 11-16. See also Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, 587-88, 753-54.



Konzertflügel der Clara Schumann (1819 - 1896) Grotrian Helfferich Schulz, Th. Steinweg Nachf. Braunschweig nach 1870. (Instr.Nr. 3848) Seit 1879 in Besitz der Künstlerin. Geschenk der Familie Grotrian-Steinweg 1985. (Nr.55)

Figure 19
Grotrian-Steinweg Grand
In possession of the Städtisches Museum Braunschweig

later acquired appeared in Europe, and the list of pianos either of them had owned, or spent considerable time practicing on was, due to their extensive touring, undoubtedly greater than that of Brahms.

Furthermore, piano firms such as Erard, Bechstein, Bösendorfer, Steinway, and Broadwood actively participated in concert promotion as a means of stimulating the reputation of their instruments. The Erard, Bösendorfer and Bechstein companies owned recital halls that became important venues for touring virtuosi like Bülow and Schumann. Often, the important piano manufacturers in a given location would develop a close

relationship with important local venues, providing pianos for concerts with the unofficial agreement of virtual exclusivity of their instruments in that venue. Such was the case for the Broadwood firm and St. James's Hall in London. This venue, which was the site of the Monday and Saturday Popular Concerts through the second half of the nineteenth century, with frequent appearances by Clara Schumann, Joseph Joachim, and other important champions of Brahms's music, featured Broadwood concert grands for the majority of the concerts. The same could be said of the Bösendorfer piano and the Musikverein in Vienna, owing to Ludwig Bösendorfer's powerful position in the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*. Late-nineteenth-century musicians, like Brahms and the performers who first championed his music, had to be able to adapt their aesthetic approach to a wide variety of pianos.

Instead, rather than confronting the complex history of the piano during Brahms's lifetime, performance practice scholars have tried to separate the piano into two mutually exclusive groups, the "period piano" and the "modern piano", while ignoring obvious contradictions in their categorizations. For example Robert Pascall, in his "*Playing Brahms: A Study in 19th-Century Performance Practice*" (1991), staunchly emphasizes the importance of instruments contemporaneous with the composition and, for the purposes of the lecture/demonstration from which the article is taken, employs a historic instrument. "I have brought my Erard of 1834, made a year after Brahms was born, to give some idea of the sound-quality he was used to and preferred, and which therefore is most appropriate for his piano music."[42] Pascall discusses Brahms's *Intermezzo* in B Minor, Op. 119, no. 1, in order to demonstrate the dependence of the music on the sound-quality of the instrument; a piece that he claims "is particularly apt for our purpose."

42 Pascall, *Playing Brahms: A Study in 19th-Century Performance*, 9.

Pascall explains that Brahms had the Erard's rate of decay in mind, which was quicker than any Steinway-type instrument when he composed this work.[43] However, his 1834 Erard piano was built nearly 60 years before this *Intermezzo* was actually written, in 1893.

Camilla Cai makes an equally dubious assertion,

> Brahms knew German and Austrian pianos better than American, French, or English ones. Although Brahms's ideal of piano sound probably developed from his acquaintance with the whole range of pianos in the German-Austrian sphere, he had strong leanings to the more conservative pianos, the Streichers and Bösendorfers.[44]

There is nothing to support this claim other than the fact that Brahms lived in Vienna from the 1860's on. Evidence of Brahms's familiarity with the pianos of Erard (French), Steinway (American), and Bechstein (German, but modeled after the American Steinway) is hardly lacking. Not to mention the fact that both Streicher and Bösendorfer also manufactured pianos within Vienna exhibiting many of the design features that distinguish the American Steinway: namely, the complete iron frame and overstringing of the bass register. There simply isn't a single example of documentary evidence attesting to Brahms's "strong leanings" towards "conservative" pianos.

The use of vague expressions, such as "knew better" or "used to," is a common fault in attempts to establish Brahms's specific intentions regarding instrument. It is difficult to imagine how historical evidence might support such assertions. Another example is Stewart Pollens's "The Schumann/

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43 Malcolm Bilson has contended the opposite view of this very passage. "At the slow speed Brahms asks for, it is quite easily realizable, even on the richest modern piano." Sherman, *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers*, 308.
44 Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," 59.

Brahms Conrad Graf Piano."[45] Pollens's article is devoted to the Conrad Graf piano owned by the Schumanns, on which Brahms played for them such compositions as his Scherzo, Opus 4, and his three piano Sonatas, Opp. 1, 2, and 5. Because of this Pollen concludes, "it is thus the piano most closely associated with his three Sonatas and Scherzo."[46] What does the phrase "most closely associated with" mean? Of these works, all but the Opus 5 Sonata had been completed prior to Brahms's visit to the Schumanns in September of 1853. The criteria for the "most appropriate" piano implied in the arguments by Pascall, Winter, and Cai, is that the particular characteristics of certain pianos *caused* Brahms to compose as he did; given another piano, he would've written quite differently. But Schumann's Graf piano did not influence the composition of these works. It is merely one piano on which these works were performed during the 1850's. We might just as well "closely associate" the Scherzo with whichever of Liszt's pianos the work was played on during Brahms's visit to Weimar earlier in 1853, or the C Major Sonata with whatever piano Brahms used for his Leipzig premiere of the work.[47]

Paradoxically, performance practice scholars have asserted the necessity of understanding Brahms's music from an aesthetic viewpoint not based on the modern piano's sound, but they have remained bound to those very premises espoused in the compositional/performance treatises cited above *because* of the modern piano. Modern performance practice scholars, like the late-nineteenth-century treatises, take for granted clarity of texture and delineation of melody as necessary artistic aims. These scholars also rely on

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45 Stewart Pollens, "The Schumann/Brahms Conrad Graf Piano," *The American Brahms Society Newsletter* 24, no. 1 (2006).
46 *Ibid*., 4.
47 Brahms performed the work at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in December of 1853.

the presumption that the dense saturation of the lower register, and seemingly "overwritten" accompaniments frequently found in Brahms's piano music, create an intolerable and inartistic mass of noise on the modern piano. At the same time, but without supporting documentary evidence, they assume that Brahms himself held these views; an assumption that is the basis for concluding Brahms did not intend performance on modern-type pianos. This stance is considerably more restrictive than the late-nineteenth-century treatises, which at least allow that a composer might use pervasive density and saturation of the low register for a certain effect.

This is not to say that Brahms's use of such textures was specifically inspired by the modern piano. The examples of Brahms's "veiled" piano aesthetic span four decades, from the Opus 10 Ballades (1854) to the Opus 119 Klavierstücke (1893). The continuities in his piano aesthetics and persistent use of similar textural devices, such as closely-spaced chords in the lower register, across these decades which saw major changes in piano design, suggest that we should not assume a rigid one-to-one relationship between his music and the changing instruments. Though his idiosyncratic manner of writing for the instrument was established in works that predate the modern piano, it does not follow that it was eventually compromised by, or as suggested by the writers quoted above, rendered incompatible with the technological developmentsof the later instruments.

Understanding the performance history of piano music in the second half of the nineteenth century, including that of Brahms, means understanding that the works were performed on a greater number of widely differing pianos than any other half-century in the history of piano music. This is a situation quite unlike that of Mozart, for example, who owned one piano

which he took with him for his own public concerts. Rather than suggesting that Brahms wrote to the specific characteristics of a particular piano, we should understand that his writing was inspired by his own idealized concept of artistic piano playing. This is an important distinction that allows for the flexibility of his aesthetics against the background of the changing piano and admits the lifelong assimilation of a rich variety of musical experiences into a complex composite aesthetic conception. This composite concept was fluid and expanded over time, influenced by experiences with new piano designs as well as awareness of the accomplishments of new and original keyboard artists.

Besides the strict opposition between "period pianos" and "modern pianos", other black and white dichotomies in the performance practice literature include "progressive" pianos vs. "conservative" ones, and French/English (and American) vs. German/Austrian. The latter categorization is perhaps the most easily defined, because a clear division can be made on the basis of the mechanism.[48] However, even this division is of limited usefulness because Viennese firms such as Streicher and Bösendorfer manufactured pianos with both types of action throughout the second half of the century. Furthermore, many pianos, like Clara Schumann's Grotrian-Steinweg, had a German action although the rest of the piano exhibited many design features modeled on the American firms.

Defining the boundaries between "period" and "modern" pianos in the second half of the nineteenth century is a matter of considerable

48 The dichotomy between the Viennese and the English actions extends back to the 18th century. English piano-makers such as Broadwood used the so-called *Stoßmechanik*, where the hammers are pushed towards the strings away from the player, while Viennese piano-makers such as Walter used the so-called *Prellmechanik*, where the hammers were flipped towards the player. Variants of both actions can be found on pianos up to the turn of the century.

complexity. In the present day one refers to "the modern piano," because of the standardization of so many aspects of piano construction: the one-piece cast-iron frame, cross-stringing, large felt hammers, and the use of some kind of double escapement repetition action. One may refer to such pianos as "Steinway-type" pianos because they follow the basic recipe of the formula that began with the Steinway pianos of the 1860's and '70's. In connection with piano making during the second half of the nineteenth century, the phrase "modern piano" might be used to distinguish between "progressive" piano makers who emulated most, if not all, of Steinway's design features, and "conservative" makers who continued to make pianos that were either straight-strung, had a more limited use of iron in the frame, had a single escapement action, used leather covered hammers, or some combination of all these features. The latter group held the belief that in gaining the added power and brilliance of tone one lost other, more important, aspects of the piano's sound: for example, a sweet, non-percussive sound, that more closely resembled the sound of stringed instruments, greater dynamic flexibility, more pungent accents, sharper rhythmic inflection, and of course, a clearer and more transparent overall sound.

Such binary oppositions can be problematic. Even a "conservative" maker such as Ludwig Bösendorfer emulated many aspects of the Steinway design, although he remained one of the most outspoken opponents of the "Steinway System." According to Leon Botstein,

> Bösendorfer had accepted cast iron and overstringing and had most likely felt that he had achieved a superior adaptation of the American advances of iron framing and overstringing.[49]

49 Leon Botstein, "Music and It Public: Habits of Listening and the Crisis of Musical Modernism in Vienna, 1870-1914" (Dissertation, Harvard University, 1985), 564-565.

The Bösendorfer piano has typically been cited in the Brahms performance practice literature as the type of "conservative" Viennese piano Brahms had in mind, though even in his own time Ludwig Bösendorfer objected strenuously to the categorization of his pianos as "conservative". As Botstein explains,

> Bösendorfer sought to shed the self-image of a reactionary, the image of which many of his Viennese colleagues rightfully earned. He considered himself a judicious innovator, capable of distinguishing nonsense from those needed improvements which assisted men like Liszt as pianists and composers. (585)

He continued to take out patents throughout his career for new design innovations, many of which, like the Steinway piano, were dedicated to sustaining the tone, and increasing power and resonance.[50] One such innovation was the so-called "cello-soundboard," an adaptation of a curved soundboard for the purpose of enriching the tone without the use of wooden ribs.[51]

A Steinway innovation of which Bösendorfer was especially critical was the duplex scale. This is the bisecting of the upper strings by an iron bar known as the "capo tasto" so that part of the string would vibrate from being struck by the hammer, the other sympathetically, enhancing the overall sound. Nevertheless, he did not disagree with the basic idea of enhancing the sound through non-speaking strings. In the 1870s he experimented with his own

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50 For a comprehensive account of Ludwig Bösendorfer's experiments with new designs, his struggle to retain his status as "innovator", and his competition with the Steinway firm, see Botstein, "Music and It Public: Habits of Listening and the Crisis of Musical Modernism in Vienna, 1870-1914," 536-687.

51 For a detailed account of this patent, and the aesthetic ideals behind it, see *Ibid.*, 591-593.

system of aliquot stringing.[52] Julius Blüthner is recognized for implementing this innovation, where extra, non-speaking, strings are run alongside the strings struck by the hammers so that they will enhance each tone through their sympathetic vibration. Ultimately, Bösendorfer did not implement this scheme; however, one of his most innovative and famous piano designs, the "Imperial",[53] accomplished essentially the same thing. The Bösendorfer "Imperial" grand piano has extra notes added to the extreme bass and extra strings, without keys or hammers to strike them, to the extreme treble. The purpose was not necessarily that they be played; in fact, the bass notes had a cover that could be pulled over them so as to not confuse pianists. Rather, this design was another innovation directed towards harnessing the extra resonance of sympathetic strings, enriching and lengthening the tone.

These innovations show that Bösendorfer, though he publicly denounced Steinway's design innovations, nevertheless responded to Steinway's trends in piano building.[54] Yet at the same time he wanted to maintain the individuality of his own company, and to preserve the sound ideals that had been its basis since the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, this firm managed to be both progressive and conservative at the same time. The pianos of Carl Bechstein, on the other hand, were cross-strung and iron-framed almost from the start and, like the Steinway, designed primarily for greater power and brilliance. For this reason, Bechstein is generally considered a "progressive" firm in histories of piano building, as well as in the performance practice literature. Nevertheless, the Bechstein piano did not have the duplex scale in Brahms's time (nor does it today), did not have as thick or rigid a case as the Steinway, had smaller, less dense hammers, and had

52 *Ibid*., 588.
53 The first Bechstein "Imperial" was unveiled in 1900.
54 See Botstein "Music and its Public," 568-69, 585.

a somewhat different repetition action. Therefore, the late-nineteenth-century Bechstein can be seen both as a "Steinway-type" piano and as a lighter "period instrument," embodying traditions that have since become obsolete. This can also be said of the "conservative" Bösendorfer piano, as well as many of the pianos that were being made during the later part of the nineteenth century.

In discussions of nineteenth-century music one must therefore be careful to specify what one means by "modern piano." The term has taken on a particular meaning in our time because of common design principles, and because prominent variant designs have since disappeared. However, the modern piano is as much a "period instrument" as an 1870's Erard or Bösendorfer. In the last several decades the term has often been used to distinguish between pianos used by "mainstream" performers and those used by "historically-informed" performers. The great artists contemporary with Brahms, however, performed on many different kinds of pianos. During the nineteenth century itself, the concept "modern piano" encompassed a rich diversity of piano construction recipes.

Conclusion

The performance/composition treatises discussed at the beginning of this chapter allude to a transition in piano aesthetics between the early decades and the final decades of the nineteenth century. Spanning the length of that transition is the piano music of Brahms, which manages to be in both worlds and yet at the same time belong exclusively to neither world. As the piano treatises in the later decades of the century are based to a large extent on the managing of overtones and resonance, it is clear that the shift in aesthetics

was related to the increased power of late-nineteenth-century pianos. However, Brahms evidently did not respond to changes in piano-making as a number of his contemporaries did. His piano writing often constitutes the diametric opposite of what these treatises proclaim to be the "modern style" during the 1880's and 1890's. Furthermore, he did not abandon many of the textural devices that can be found in piano works at the beginning of his career. A number of scholars have maintained that the persistence of these stylistic characteristics constitutes proof of his allegiance to pre-modern pianos. I have argued that this assertion is based on a misinterpretation of his piano aesthetics, and is not supported by documentary evidence or an objective assessment of the experiences of pianists during the second half of the nineteenth century. This attitude, in fact, embodies a kind of either/or perspective on instruments that would have been impractical and unthinkable to a nineteenth-century pianist.

A performer's tastes regarding instrument are often intimately related to that performer's physical approach to the instrument. Though we know Clara Schumann admired her Grotrian-Steinweg, and Brahms admired some Streichers he played as well as some Steinways and Bechsteins, we can only attempt to intuit what it was they admired in these instruments, and more importantly, how they might have handled them. It is likely that the pianists of Brahms's generation who did come to admire modern-type instruments, but after having first spent many years practicing and performing on a wide range of other pianos, would have handled them quite differently then subsequent generations who never knew anything else. Moreover, stylistic changes in a musical culture do not occur overnight.

The value for pianists today in gaining experience on nineteenth-

century pianos other than the Steinway-type is the potential for these instruments to challenge and expand the pianist's concept of artistic piano playing. The differences among pianos never occasioned Brahms to declare a certain type as "inappropriate", however varying rates of tone decay, key weight, and projection must have led to a more nuanced and flexible conception of balance than necessary for musicians only using one type of piano. Brahms's unique handling of register and textural density remains enigmatic to pianists today who must confront questions of balance. We must look beyond the kind of clarity that marks the rise of the modern style at the turn of the century and has persisted as an aesthetic doctrine ever since. Historically informed performance, through exploration of a variety of instruments and an examination of available documentary evidence, can help in this endeavor. But in order for such investigations to be valuable, they should confront the intriguing idiosyncrasies of Brahms's piano aesthetics and the complexity of late-nineteenth-century performance culture objectively and imaginatively.

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