

BRAHMS'S TRIO OP. 8: AN INTERPRETER'S ANALYSIS

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This paper presents an interpretive analysis of Brahms's Trio op. 8. That implies performing, and also seeing in music a message that is in part exclusively musical, thus irreducible to words, but also full of references that help to explain part of its expressive power on both performers and listeners.

I will start with two methodological premises: the theory of musical topoi, and the “Retrospect” as a Romantic narrative archetype. Then, a topical analysis of the four movements of the work will try to determine what the main references are. Finally, a narrative reading of the results of the analysis will be inserted into a global map of Brahms's musical world, to try and evaluate every expressive feature within its own context.

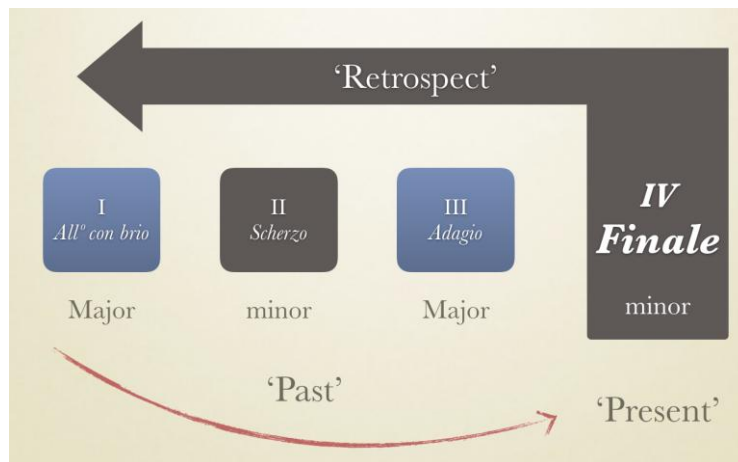


Fig. 1: A Narrative Listening to Brahms's op. 8.

I start at the end of the analysis, with its final results (see Fig. 1). I interpret the work as a “*Retrospect*,” or more precisely as the representation of one.¹ Now, as you know, this Trio op. 8 is two works in one, a youth work from 1854, when Brahms was only 20, and the thorough revision of it in 1889, when he was 55. It’s worth the effort to play both versions, long and short, and enjoy the differences. My point here is that the history of the piece has a correlate in the “*Retrospect*” that the piece represents.

The finale seems to be located in the present from which a “flashback” takes the musical Persona through several stages of a life journey. Starting with a 1st movement *Allegro* in major, a *scherzo* macabre in minor as a 2nd movement, and a dialogue between the sacred and the profane in the 3rd movement in major, the finale synthesizes the whole drama of the four-movement cycle

¹ Quotation marks are used throughout to indicate the representation of something and not the thing being represented as such.

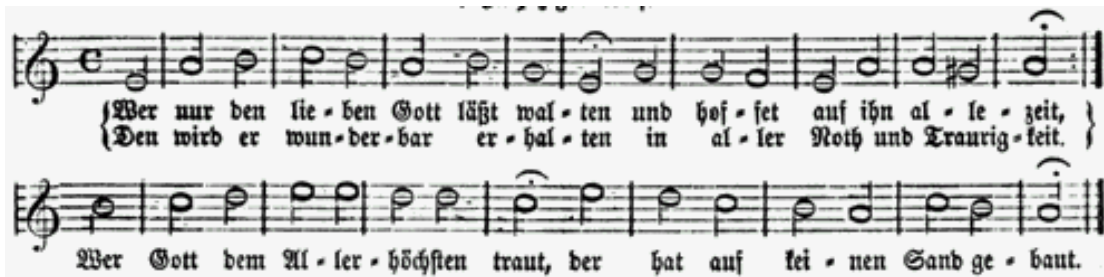
and takes it to the ultimate, irrevocable minor. The narrative archetype from major to minor is quite an unusual one, and it is one of the signs that made me imagine a “Retrospective” interpretation.

1. Methodological Premisses

These are the main methodological premisses that were used to interpret Brahms’s op. 8 and so many other works by him: the theory of musical topoi and the “Retrospect” as a narrative archetype in nineteenth-century music.

1a. Theory of Musical Topoi

One special kind of musical sign is called a musical *topos*. Musical topoi can be defined as recurring references to cultural units imported and stylized from one medium to another.² The correlation between signifier and signified, between a musical fragment and its cultural reference is the result of convention: a social agreement in a historical moment. That includes any human activities susceptible to have a musical correlate.³



Ex. 1: Georg Neumark's Hymn *Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten* (1641)

An example of a musical topos is the sacred “Hymn” that is still sung in Protestant churches (see Ex. 1), and that is often used as a reference in instrumental music, albeit with a more abstract signification. Another topos is the “Revolutionary Song” that became so popular in France around 1789. It spread all over Europe in the successive decades and is a frequent reference in Beethoven's music, for example. *La Marseillaise* (Ex. 2) is the paradigmatic example of a revolutionary song, although it has served as the official anthem of the French republic since 1795. It has allowed for many quotations in art music, including Beethoven, Rossini, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Offenbach, Wagner, Shostakovich, the Beatles, and many others.

Now these two musical topoi can be combined in a so-called *trope*, i.e. a combination of two different musical signs into a third, different sign that shares some of their expressive and musical

² Our definition of musical topos, or topic, is based on RATNER 1980: 9; ALLANBROOK 1983: 2f.; GRABÓCZ 2009: 22f., MIRKA 2014: 2.

³ Umberto Eco defined “cultural unit” as “simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity.” Cf. Eco 1979, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 67. Quoted by SPITZER 2013: p. 211.

features.⁴ This particular trope, a civil “Hymn,” is actually an emblem of Brahms's music. It appears often in his works, and it helps to decisively understand his expressive language. The paradigmatic example of Brahms's civil “Hymn” is the main theme of his first symphony's *finale*. It is astonishingly close to the main theme of op. 8.

All^o non troppo, ma con brio

Ex. 2: J. Brahms, Symphony no. 1/IV, mm. 62-65.

1b. “Retrospect” as a narrative archetype in music of the nineteenth century.

Second, I proposed in another paper the term “Retrospect” for this looking backwards from a dysphoric present to an irretrievable, idyllic past and back.⁵ The “Retrospect” is marked by a spontaneous tone of the discourse, suggesting an improvising subject. Typical of this musical commentary are: arbitrary or expressive modifications of some previous material; irruptions and interruptions, sudden contrasts, repetitions and varied repetitions, very little new material—all features of C.P.E Bach's *empfindsamer Stil* (“sensitive style”), especially in his works for the keyboard that sound like written-down improvisations and used to be labelled as *Sturm und Drang*.⁶

The “Retrospect” represents an expressive use of the double temporality implicit in the changing from a predefined to a spontaneous musical material and vice versa. It is a new interpretation of a typical device of eighteenth-century music. The distinction between predefined and spontaneous material in instrumental music is the representation of two contrary modes of narration. Take, for example, the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 13 (Ex. n. 3a) . It starts with a firm period: 4 measures antecedent, 4 measures consequent. This sounds like a song based on a poem with a metrical pattern.

But right after that (Ex. n. 3b), “somebody” appears to leave the predetermined material aside, speak as herself and comment upon that memory. That “somebody” could be called a Musical Persona.⁷

⁴ See Robert Hatten's definition, who coined the term, in HATTEN 2004: 15f. For a more exhaustive account on musical troping, including irony, see HATTEN 1994: 161-196.

⁵ GRIMALT 2016a, 2016b.

⁶ A lot of features of what used to be labeled as a *Sturm und Drang* topic have an operatic origin. Clive MCCLELLAND (2012, 2017) has described two of its most salient topoi, *Ombra* and *Tempesta*. In spite of its historical importance, the 'improvised' aspect of the *empfindsamer Stil* has not gotten much attention yet.

⁷ For a definition and description of the Musical Persona, see GRIMALT 2016a, 2016b.



Ex. 3a: Beethoven, Sonata op. 13/II, mm. 1-8.



Ex. 3b: Beethoven, Sonata op. 13/II, mm. 16-17.

In this case, the musical persona seems to be asking questions in a dysphoric mode. Characteristically, the motif seems to be generated from itself, in a structurally loose manner, suggesting “improvisation.” Historically, the predefined mode is related to its functional origin, whether serving as a poem in a song or an aria, or as a dance pattern. The spontaneous tone, instead, is the heir to improvisation. The importance of improvisation to the historical development of the first written-down instrumental music cannot be overemphasized. In musical performing practice, it had a natural presence until roughly the world wars.⁸

Musical agency, this “somebody” switching between modes of narration, has been investigated notably by Edward T. Cone, Grabócz Márta, Byron Almén, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle and Eero Tarasti. Hatten used the term *Persona* in his Beethoven analyses (1994, 2004), following Edward T. Cone, until he preferred to call it a virtual agent. Tarasti offers a semiotic analysis of musical improvisation, in the last chapter of *Signs of Music* (2002): pp. 179-197. Both Hatten (1994: 55, 58, 176, 180, 136) and Monelle (2000: cap. 6, *Text and Subjectivity*, and 7, *Mahler and Gustav*), moreover, tackle in a more general way the “problem of agency in music,” critically following Fred Maus (1989), Lawrence Kramer (1990), and Carolyn Abbate (1991). Musical agency is no doubt a hot subject right now, but none of these researchers, to my

⁸ Josef Hofmann can still be heard improvising his own preludes before every movement of the pieces he performed at his Jubilee concerts in 1937 at the Metropolitan Opera New York and in 1945 at Carnegie Hall. Cf. Anatole LEIKIN (2015: p. 2).

knowledge, has linked the Musical Persona with the difference between “predetermined” and “spontaneous” material.

The same distinction between a predefined and a spontaneous tone that helped us establish the presence of a Musical Persona can be extended to some other pairs of opposites. Rhetorically, the dichotomy predefined/spontaneous corresponds to enunciation and commentary in a discourse. Aesthetically, it means the irruption in eighteenth-century music of subjectivity into the musical art, as Descartes or Kant had described it already. It is the ironic game of writing down some improvisations, thus raising them to "universally valid" works of art.

In the nineteenth century, this dichotomy takes on a temporal value. In Romantic aesthetics, spontaneous implies truthful, and truthfulness replaces to a certain degree the classicist ideal of beauty.⁹ That means a general scepticism toward any constructed, artificial discourse. Improvisation, with its roots in early instrumental music, came in the nineteenth century to be equal to the flow of consciousness of literary narrators or poets. Long before James Joyce, William Wordsworth defined [good] poetry in 1800 as *the overflow of [powerful] spontaneous feelings*.¹⁰ Romantic instrumental music becomes thus a direct representation of the human soul as an ambivalent, dangerously inscrutable discourse, one that can express so much without saying one word.

Moreover, Romantic poetry and art tend to assign to memories a preeminent value. An example of the crucial function of remembering in nineteenth-century aesthetics is an entry by Joseph Joachim into Brahms's *Schatzkästlein*, i.e. a diary Brahms kept with quotations and ideas that he felt attracted to: "Write down everything that you feel, so that it becomes part of you, as if it were a reminiscence."¹¹

Musical material	Temporal correlate	Ethic, aesthetic implications
Predefined (“firm”)	Idyllic, irretrievable past	Scepticism
Spontaneous (“loose”)	Present	Truthfulness

Fig. n. 2: Three aspects of the “Retrospect”

In musical narrativity, the expressive genre of the “Retrospect” finds some noteworthy analogies (see Fig. n. 3). If the predetermined, regular parts correspond to a memory of the past, and the spontaneous ones to their inner commentary, this has its parallel in the recitative/aria sequence in eighteenth-century opera. The analogy helps to support the idea of two different temporalities. The difference between a predetermined past and a loose present is also close to

⁹ Cf. e.g. KLOPSTOCK 1779, or KLEIST 1878.

¹⁰ WORDSWORTH 1802: Preface (2d edition) to *Lyrical Ballads*.

¹¹ Quoted by SWAFFORD 1997, p. 70.

what Schönberg calls *firm* vs. *loose*, or to Robert Hatten's distinction (2004) between spontaneous and thematic musical gestures.¹²

PREDEFINED	SPONTANEOUS
REMEMBERED PAST	Commenting Present
ARIA	Recitative
'FIRM'	'Loose' (Schönberg)
'THEMATIC'	'Spontaneous' (Hatten)

Fig. n. 3: Analogies to the “Retrospect.”

The paradigmatic example of “Retrospect” is arguably the fourth movement of Brahms's sonata op. 5 (1853), called precisely *Rückblick* (Literally, “Look back” or “Retrospect”; in cinematographical terms, “Flashback”). It is a variation in minor mode and in a martial tone of the former *Andante*, the second movement of the sonata.

There are uncountable examples of the “Retrospect” expressive genre in romantic piano music, in analogy to the aforementioned *Intermezzo* in Brahms's piano Sonata op. 5 (1853). Its explicit rubric *Rückblick* (“Look back” or “Retrospect”) is illuminating to try and grasp the expressive sense of the many *Intermezzi* in Brahms's late piano pieces: they are probably also *Rückblicke*, “Looks back” on past memories.¹³

That the “Retrospect” might be an important narrative archetype in Brahms's output is confirmed by Reinhold Brinkmann's analysis of the Second Symphony as a “Late Idyll.” Rather than to the obvious halcyon aspects of the work, Brinkmann points to its subtly somber undertones and calls the symphony “an emphatic questioning of the pastoral world, a firm denial of the possibility of pure serenity.”¹⁴ That is, a look back to an idyll that is gone forever. This interpretation is supported by the reference in the first movement to Brahms's own song *Es liebt sich so lieblich im Lenze*, which he composed earlier that spring. The composer wrote the song's words onto his working copy of the symphony.¹⁵ Heine's poem amounts precisely to the ironic negation of pastoral, laceratingly expressed in pastoral terms.¹⁶

¹² There is also a parallel with HATTEN's opposition (1997: p. 627) between *Satz* and *Gang*, basing on A. B. Marx's terminology. Raymond MONELLE (2000: p. 102) remarks the temporality implied in this pair of opposites, as a contribution of Robert Hatten that was absent in Marx's original idea. However, I hear both temporalities in an opposite sense. In my audition, the loose, spontaneous parts (which come close to Marx's *Gänge*) in most romantic piano pieces correspond to the present, whereas the firm sections (*Sätze*) tend to represent an idealized, irretrievable past. Of course Marx, Hatten and Monelle have rather the classical sonata than the romantic *Klavierstück* in mind.

¹³ GRIMALT 2016b.

¹⁴ BRINKMANN 1995: p. 79.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 122f.

¹⁶ See also GRIMALT 2013 on the ‘Remembered Idyll’. In many of Chopin's Mazurkas, a mostly pastoral past is evoked from a dysphoric or melancholic present. The musical persona recites to herself the idyllic

Now the expressive genre of the “Retrospect¹⁷” means to thematise the internalisation of music. It means a reflection as to what music can mean to a subject of the nineteenth century. It is music about (remembered) music, similar to the *mise en abyme* in narrative or in painting.¹⁷

Ex. n. 4: Brahms Trio op. 8/I, secondary theme, mm. 76-83.

2. Topical Analysis of the Four Movements

Now back to our analysis—let us try to elucidate the main references in each of the four movements of the work.

2.1. First movement: Civil “Hymn,” “Lament”. “Retrospect”

In this first movement I would like to focus on three different musical signs, namely

1. Civil “Hymn” as main theme
2. Lyric “Lament” as secondary theme

song from the past, remembered by heart, and then expressively comments upon it, distorting it, shortening it, enlarging it. Focusing on Chopin's Mazurkas helped to study one complete set of very similar pieces. A paradigmatic example of the 'Remembered Idyll' is the [Mazurka op 30 n. 3 in D-flat](#), where a euphoric and a dysphoric version of a memory alternate, first the original one, then its darker echo, from the present.

¹⁷ In narrative, Cervantes's *Don Quichotte* and André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* stand out. There is a lot of theatre in the theatre as well, as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in Molière's *Le malade imaginaire*, or in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, that includes a piece of *Commedia dell'arte*.

3. “Retrospect” as narrative archetype or Tone of the Discourse. The “Retrospect” works both for this movement and for the entire cycle.

The civil “Hymn” has already been explained as the main theme’s reference. Let us move to the secondary theme. Specifically, what are the signs for the performers to understand these references, and how does that affect the performing decisions to take?

The secondary theme (Ex. n. 4) has a periodic form, four measures antecedent closing on the dominant, plus four measures consequent resolving on the minor relative of the main key, G# minor. Each member of the period divides itself into two contrasting segments: a unison down-and upwards, and a spontaneous, lyrical “comment.” The unison can be related to the Classic operatic topos of *Ombra*.¹⁸ Violin and cello accompany that unison with some mournful “exclamations,” an old rhetoric figure.¹⁹ Finally, both antecedent and consequent end in a “*pianto*” figure, the topos of “Weeping.” In Brahms’s music, this dry Unison is usually related to the semantic field of “Death.”

Now to the “Retrospect.” How do we know the initial “Hymn” is not being sung now, but it represents a “memory,” enacted within the inner consciousness of the Musical Persona? There are some signs of blurring that indicate an indirect view, the Subject “remembering.”

First, the key of B major, which can be understood as C-flat. C-flat would be too awkward for notation, so we have B major, but the “Hymn” would be typically in C major, never in such a far-away key.²⁰ This tonal “**refraction**” is a sign in many piano pieces of the Romantic period, paradigmatically as an index of the “night” in Chopin’s Nocturnes: the night for nineteenth-century art is the *other* time, where anything is possible. That is why some cantabile melodies that might have been originally issued in G or in D major are heard now in G-flat or in D-flat major. Imagine the eery effect those keys might have had on contemporaries, considering a non-equal temperament of the instruments, where all intervals, even the most consonant ones, sound disquietingly distorted. A first example of that might be Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, where to the right pedal, to be held throughout the first movement, blurring everything together, the “refraction” of D minor gives D-flat minor, or less awkwardly notated, C# minor.

Brahms also gives this tonal shift to some of his works. The piano quartet in C minor op. 60 (1875) used to originally be in C# minor. It seems for him—and for his contemporaries—that this shifting does not essentially change the tonal identity of the piece but gives it a certain expressive nuance.

Let me add an anecdote to this point. One summer in Sassnitz (1876) Brahms had been listening to a bunch of frogs in a pond. Telling his friend Georg Henschel about this, Brahms hears “the poor Frog Prince” croaking “with his yearning, mournful C-flat!”²¹ And he adds:

“Can you imagine anything more sad and melancholy than this music, the undefinable sounds of which for ever and ever move within the pitiable compass of a diminished third?”

¹⁸ See MCCLELLAND 2012: pp. 123-126.

¹⁹ Cf. ‘*Exclamatio*’ or ‘*Ecphosis*’ in BARTEL 1997: 265-267.

²⁰ The same enharmonic twist happens in Chopin’s *Fantasia* op. 49, mm. 199ff.

²¹ The singer, composer and pianist Georg Henschel wrote down daily Brahms’s words, in those summer vacations they spent together. He published them later in English: *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms*. Boston 1907: 35f. A facsimile is available online.

The diminished third is the interval that forms the thematic material of the desperate finale of op. 8.

A second sign of “blurring” is the irregular metrical structure of the initial period, suggesting a subjectively warped version of the “Hymn” reference, as it happens when one recalls a memory. To the initial four-measure antecedent on the dominant, instead of closing with a consequent on the tonic, a varied repetition of the antecedent in “Love Duet” texture needs another four measures (thus twelve altogether) to articulate the theme on the third scale-degree. First, however, a sighing, syncopated and dissonant “exclamation” on m. 9 breaks any expectation of a symmetrical, regular phrase structure. It is the “Subject” giving its own version of the “Hymn,” not the actual Hymn being represented.

Moreover, this syncopation in m. 9 is being anticipated and announced in the left hand of the piano, from the very first measure on. That is another index of some subjective inflection, as it would be unthinkable in the proper direct version of the “Hymn.”

Finally, the structural pivotal points of the sonata form are also typically blurred, as if they were motivated by an inner, natural flow of thoughts and feelings, and not by a constructive decision. This is an important point for performers, who should avoid a mechanical pulse, even where there is no indication. Agogic freedom gives the illusion of a spontaneous appearance of every new element, as in a free expressive speech. Brahms tends to notate precisely his rhythmical and agogic variations, as in the last measures that introduce the secondary theme (mm. 72-75), or in the Exposition's Epilogue (115-117).

2.2. Second movement: *Scherzo* “macabre,” Pastoral “Idyll,” “Love Duet.”

Turning *scherzi* into something opposite to their original character is a typical feature of Romantic music. Young Brahms seems to be anticipating here a topos that was literary rather than musical. Franz Schubert has a certain inclination to the “Macabre” topic: see, for example, his D minor quartet, the E-flat Trio, or the song *Erlkönig*.²² Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* was composed in 1874, between both versions of op. 8. Mahler's Fourth symphony, with its famous *Todtentanz* or “Death Dance,” as the composer himself labelled it, was finished only in 1900.²³ But in literature and in the painting, the medieval topos of Death as a violinist who plays for the dead to dance through the night of Halloween had a widespread presence in the imagination of the nineteenth century.

The *macabre* belongs to the more general category of *das Unheimliche*, that is, “Uncanny.” It is rather frequent in Brahms's music, especially in *scherzi*. Liszt also widely uses the macabre and the “uncanny” topos at around the same time.²⁴ Its frequent musical features include the minor mode, frequent dissonance, and the absence of periodical, regular structures, polyphonic imitations, hunting-horn formulas (*Hornquinten*) warped in a minor version, abundant diminished thirds, fifths and sevenths, extreme dynamic contrasts, *staccato* articulation, sarcastic or eerie “Laughter,” accents on the weak parts of the measure, and a “devilish,” virtuoso-like tempo.

²² I am indebted to Clive McClelland for these references.

²³ Cf. FLOROS 1985: 116-120, GRIMALT 2012: 163ff.

²⁴ GRABÓCZ 1996.

The *Trio* presents from the beginning the parallel melody in sixths and thirds typical of the “Love Duet” topos—first on the piano (Antecedent <), then on strings (Consequent >). The periodical structure, the short melodic range, the consonant, diatonic sonorities, the simple rhythms—everything contrasts so sharply with the precedent Scherzo as to make the listener doubt its verisimilitude.

That is precisely the point of Reinhold Brinkmann (1990/1995), that it is the “negation of an Idyll.” If Brinkmann's hypothesis should be correct, as we are convinced it is, Brahms would be inviting to a narrative reading, and the negation of the “Idyll” could be understood only in the context of the whole movement and of the whole op. 8 cycle. In such an audition, the Reprise of the sombre scherzo confirms the listeners' worst suspicions and brings them back to the dysphoric present from which the impossible, irretrievably lost “Idyll” was being evoked. Here is the narrative archetype of the “Retrospect” once more. Brahms's Second Symphony op. 73 (1877), often called his “Pastoral” Symphony, was often described by Brahms as the most sad and melancholy thing he ever wrote. To his publisher Simrock he even added that it should be printed with a black rivet, as in obituaries.²⁵ Too often, this irony is misunderstood, and the piece is taken literally. A certain Lachner instead wrote to Brahms insightfully noting the sombre aspects of his recent Second Symphony, as an *emphatic questioning of the pastoral world, a firm denial of the possibility of pure serenity*.²⁶ The references to a Classic, Haydnesque style reinforce the impression of an irretrievable past.²⁷ Jan Swafford related the Second Symphony with a distressed motet composed on the very same summer of 1877: *Warum ist das Licht gegeben den Mühseligen? Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery*, from the book of Job 3: 20-23. That is another elegy, as the composer described it to Clara Schumann, a “Retrospect” on all that is definitively lost. It becomes even more explicit in his Fourth Symphony op. 98 (1884).

In a broader, cultural context, Brahms's pessimistic views seem to contradict Beethoven's cheerful perspectives in the finale of his Ninth Symphony op. 125 (1824). It is the same puzzled look as in Chekhov's characters or in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faust*. The same hopelessness of most of Mahler's symphonies and songs, as if Brahms's music was foreseeing the failure of Modernity's project altogether, that is, the great wars and all the social inequalities of the twentieth century. Brahms's music seems to represent the freezing of all bourgeois great expectations.²⁸

One last note on performance: this movement and the *finale* are two exceptions in Brahms's metric notation. He would normally write them in 3/8 or 6/8, not in ¾ and then think in whole measures. That Brahms would beat both movements in whole measures is easy to see in the metronome indications from 1854, dotted half-note = 100, respectively dotted half-note = 66. He dropped off all metronome indications in 1891, but not this for him highly unusual contravention of the *tempo giusto* doctrine derived from Johann Kirnberger (1776).²⁹

²⁵ SWAFFORD 1997: 436ff.

²⁶ BRINKMANN 1995: 79. The letter is quoted in pp. 126-129.

²⁷ Both the references to Haydn and the “False Appearances” as in the German expression *zu schön, um wahr zu sein* (“too beautiful to be true”) are features that have been described on Mahler's style with the same expressive meaning, e.g. in his Fourth Symphony. Cf. GRIMALT 2011, 2012.

²⁸ Cf. an interview by Max Nyffeler to R. Brinkmann (2001) at <http://www.beckmesser.de/themen/brink/int.html>.

²⁹ Kirnberger, *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik*. Cf. ALLANBROOK (ed.) 1998: 28-42.

2.3. Third movement: *Adagio*. Dialogue between a “Sacred Hymn” and the modern “Subject.”

Two textures and two paces oppose each other in this *Adagio*: the piano starts with an organ-like “Choral” reference in half notes. To that “*Interrogatio*” on the dominant, a “reply” on strings closes the phrase on the tonic, in quarter notes. A new version of the 6-measure phrase, mm. 7-12, brings the “question” and its “answer” to the relative minor.³⁰ This mirrors the first movement going to G# minor to expose its secondary theme. The tonal polarity B major/G# minor will be crucial throughout the whole movement. There seems to be an allusion to the first movement’s main theme on the left hand of the piano, as if the *Adagio* would be dealing with the same (existential?) questions from another (spiritual) standpoint.

Due precisely to their opposed textures, paces and references, the piano and the strings sound “sacred” and “human” respectively. To a serene, consonant, hymn-like diastematic on one hand, on the other hand wide intervals, dissonance and chromaticism seem to “comment” in an unequal “duo.” Until the closing cadence in m. 32, the two groups chase and complement each other's utterances in progressively shorter segments, lending each other some of the opposite group's characteristics—as it should be in a genuine dialogue.

The elegiac central part of the movement, mm. 32-65, was meant to have three subsections in symmetrical disposition, mirroring the structure of the whole movement: **m** (G# minor, the cello leading), **n** (tonally unstable, the piano leading), **m'** (G# minor, the violin leading). But then something seems to irrupt into this symmetry and adds an Epilogue from m. 56 on. This irruption breaks the symmetrical initial design and adds a whole fourth section. Its expressive meaning is the reinforce the “spontaneous” feeling that the whole section exhaled, starting in m. 32. It is as if the musical “triple persona” could not stop their dialogue, adding a *forte* climax in mm. 61f. that leads to another try of a conclusive cadence. The thematic material is typical for a “spontaneous” tone of the discourse: very scarce material, many repetitions of smaller or bigger segments, as if someone would be saying very few verses for themselves, repeating emphatically some words or syllables.

The retransition to the Reprise, mm. 63-65, gives to the piano the role of the dysphoric G# minor voice, to the strings a comforting E major. After several see-saw changes, the strings seem to convince the piano, which starts the Reprise on E major as the fourth degree of the tonic. Moreover, the piano incorporates a new triplet rhythm that lends some of the central section's rhetorical subjectivism to this last part of the movement.

2.4. Finale: *Allegro*. “Death,” “Rustic” Pastoral.

The main theme of the rondo-sonata finale could be called an anti-theme. It is based on the intervallic sequence 6-5-4# that is one of the indexes of a “Pathetic” style since *opera seria*

³⁰ Here just one of the usual markers of a rhetoric “*Interrogatio*” are at work: the closing on the dominant. See GRIMALT 2014: 85.

times.³¹ Indeed, the disquietude of the initial section, marked *molto agitato* in the 1854 version, is only reinforced by a failure to achieve any cadence on the tonic. The phrases close on the dominant or on the relative minor, once again. These absences can be understood as an index of the greatest absence, “Death.”

The secondary theme, mm. 64ff., seems a reference to some “Bear Dance,” one exotic variant of a “Rustic” Pastoral. If the Trio in the second movement belonged to an “Idyllic” Pastoral, here the latent violence of the bizarre syncopated rhythm, the missing harmonic accompaniment, the great intervallic leaps and the “naked” texture point to an “exotic” topos, quite on the outer border of the “Pastoral” semantic field. In the context of this movement, and considering the trajectory of the whole cycle, the resort to such a savage reference only adds to the hopelessness of the narrative. The “Rustic” combines the ruralness of “Pastoral” with the strangeness of the “Exotic” topos, which has been described as “Hungarian Gypsy” or “*Alla turca*” in the Classic repertoire.³² It is important for the performers to take very seriously the indication *pesante* in m. 64 on the cello part. Taking down the tempo here until the end of the Exposition m. 107 helps to yield the expressive meanings of this only real theme in the finale, one of the main earnings of the 1891 reworking.

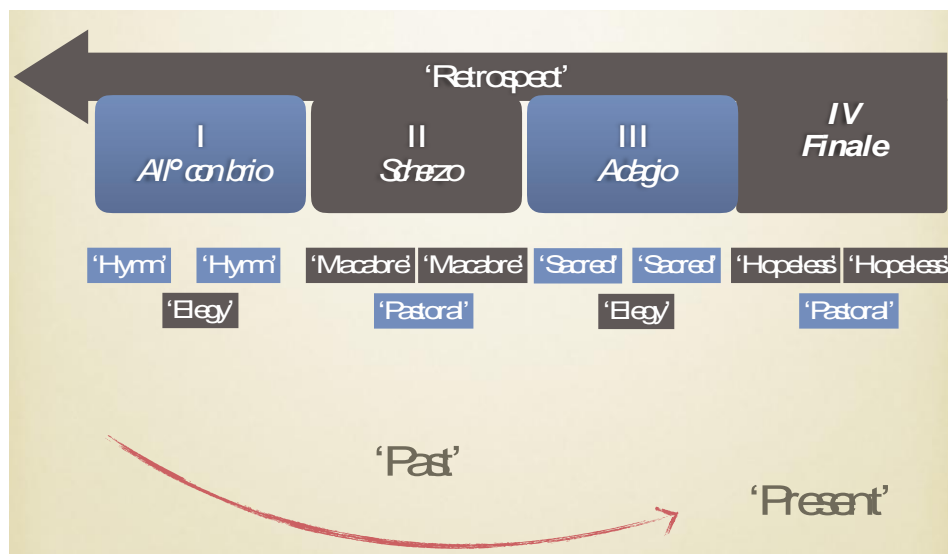


Fig. n. 4: “Retrospect” from the Finale to the rest of Brahms's op. 8.

The restlessness of the main theme, or anti-theme, gets the last word of course. The Rondo-Coda, staying *forte* from m. 274 on, tries to reach a satisfying cadence that is delayed until m. 310. The characteristic dotted rhythm dominates and agitates all through the last measures of this sombre finale, which revives the macabre references of the scherzo, including the dissonances, the diminished chords and intervals, and the conspicuous absence of a melody or a firm harmony

³¹ Vasili BYROS (2014: 381-414) has studied this schema in its "mortal, funereal, and sacrificial connotations" in Beethoven's music. It can and should be seen within a historically wider, "pathetic" signification, as part of references to the *opera seria* such as "*Ombra*."

³² See MAYES 2014. For the 'Pastoral', see MONELLE 2006.

in the main theme. It is the tragic present from which the whole four-movement cycle has been remembered.

3. Narrative global reading of op. 8 within Brahms's oeuvre.

Starting from the *Finale* as “present time,” that desperate negation of any luminous outcome, some different topoi have been examined and discarded, as if they were “memories”: see Fig. n. 4.

First, the civil “Hymn,” a collective topos, put in question by an elegiac secondary theme. Second, the Pastoral “Idyll” in the Trio, surrounded by “macabre” forebodings. Third, an exploration of “spirituality” seemed to grant some momentary peace to the Musical Persona, except for the central section, direct heir of the secondary theme of the initial *Allegro*. The *Adagio* reproduces the scheme of the 1st movement, the *Finale* that of the *Scherzo*, using similar topical references. The finale leaves no perspective of a solution to the questions raised in the work. The only comfort is perhaps the good memories that started the work and shone occasionally through the whole piece.

Both the specific solutions to every movement and the final outcome invite to sketch a map of the work's topical world. The Trio op. 8 seems to be a recapitulation of young Brahms's resources after Robert Schumann's article *Neue Bahnen* challenged him to live up to those great expectations. In Roger Moseley's words,

Hugely ambitious in concept, scale, materials and process, the Trio in B houses a welter of musical ideas and idioms, almost as if Brahms had taken it upon himself to compile a lexicon of all the styles at his command.³³

In fact, the four main references that the work proposes can be divided into two axes. Vertically, dysphoric and euphoric, that is, the “elegiac” and “macabre,” and on the other hand the “Hymns” and the “Idyll.” Horizontally, two topoi belong to the spiritual world (“Hymns” and “Lyricism”) and two to the bodily earth (“Death” and the “Rustic,” exoticist version of the Pastoral). This results in a semiotic square: see Fig. n. 5.

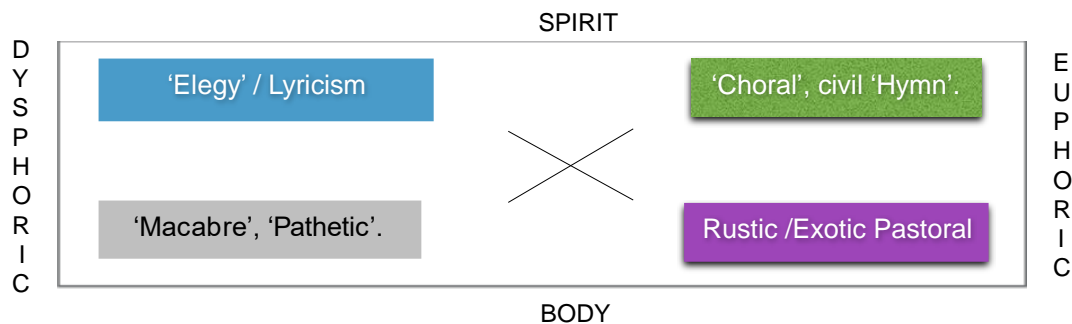


Fig. n. 5: Topical map of Brahms's op. 8, and beyond.

³³ MOSELEY 2007: 255.

This topical map can be useful to locate any other topical references not only in this seminal piece, but also within the rest of Brahms's œuvre.

Conclusions

As a whole, Brahms's op. 8 appears as a meditation on life and death in a similar way as the piano pieces op. 118 of 1893. Death seems to be a constant in Brahms's reflections. This finds an explicit musical correlate in his *German Requiem* op. 45 of the 1860s, and in the late *Four Serious Songs* op. 121 (1896). In both vocal works the emphasis was on hope and comfort. In instrumental pieces instead, where no texts offer any comfort, a double disillusion seems to take shape: one metaphysical, maybe religious, and one aesthetic. On one hand, the evangelic, maternal sweetness of op. 45 and op. 121 give way to a nihilist darkness. On the other hand, by abandoning any kind of explicit singing, which would have amounted to a public statement, the cycle becomes an intimate meditation, hidden under more or less esoteric constructive designs (see Fig. n. 6). In other words, it becomes what used to be called “absolute music.”

	Early	Late	
Vocal	<i>German Requiem</i> (1860s)	<i>Four Serious Songs</i> (1896)	'Hope'
Chamber, instrumental	<i>Trio</i> op. 8 (1854/ 1891)	<i>Klavierstücke</i> op. 118 (1893)	'Nihilism'

Fig. n. 6: Some of Brahms's musical meditations on Death.

Brahms gave up piano sonatas with op. 5, when he was 20. His chamber music and his later works for piano solo hide under a spontaneous, amateur appearance a musical construction of great aesthetic ambition. *Musica reservata* to the connoisseur, albeit accessible to the plain *aficionado*.³⁴ In these chamber genres, the apparent absence of a program seems to open the gates to a private confessional area. A topical narrative analysis confirms what the intuition had already grasped: these works are the negation of the traditional “Pastoral.” The bewilderment of the turn to the twentieth century can be felt in both versions of op. 8.

³⁴ In Jan SWAFFORD's words (1997: p. 587): *they [the late piano pieces] are a summation of what Brahms had learned, almost scientific studies of compositional craft and of piano writing, disguised as pretty little salon pieces.* It is the same ambiguity that gives so much life to Chopin's mazurkas: the intimacy of the Musical Persona is only latent under the cloak of mundanity, because its naked exposure would be indecent. That understating game with genres, offering more than the generic titles promise, is part of the romantic irony, especially in Chopin's *Études* and *Préludes*. Cf. LEIKIN 2015.

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