Re-forming Brahms: Sonata Form and the Horn Trio, Op. 40

Christopher K. Thompson

In his essay "Some Aspects of Beethoven's Art Forms," Donald Francis Tovey challenges many of the claims inherent in traditional sonata-form analysis.¹ For example, he takes the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, op. 22—a work often thought to be the ideal embodiment of textbook sonata form—and redirects our attention toward its many unconventional formal aspects. In the second part of his essay, Tovey reverses his strategy, showing a notoriously atypical sonata-form movement—the first of Beethoven's String Quartet in C-sharp Minor, op. 131—to be surprisingly conventional in design.

Tovey's approach to Opus 131 brings to mind the first movement of Brahms's Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40. Conspicuously absent from analyses of its first movement is any mention of sonata form. In fact, nearly every writer who discusses this work makes a point of saying that this is the only instance among Brahms's chamber works in which he avoids the traditional plan for the first movement of a sonata.

¹D.F. Tovey, "Some Aspects of Beethoven's Art Forms" [1927], in The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays, ed. Hubert J. Foss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 271–97.
Walter Frisch's assessment is typical: "In the first movement of the horn trio (1865), Brahms takes the surprising step of avoiding sonata form altogether—the only such case in his entire œuvre." Yet Frisch does not say why he himself rejects a sonata-form interpretation. Similarly puzzling is James Webster's curt dismissal of this movement in his discussion of Brahms's "first maturity" (ca. 1860-65). As Webster claims, "the Horn Trio, Op. 40, is omitted here because of the lack of a first movement in sonata form."

As I will show, however, the first movement of Opus 40 manifests a sufficient number of sonata-form attributes to situate it squarely within that tradition. Conversely, most writers maintain that the threefold repetition of opening material beginning in measures 1, 131, and 200—interspersed with contrasting episodes beginning in measures 77 and 167—is more akin to a traditional rondo design. I will therefore begin examining this movement as a rondo in accordance with the consensus view.

**Marx, the Rondo, and Unfulfilled Expectations**

According to Walter Frisch, the first movement of the Horn Trio

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2Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 96. The following views are as similar as they are succinct: "Brahms even resigns the sonata form (the only instance of the kind among his instrumental pieces in several movements)" (Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work* [1936], 3rd ed. [New York: Da Capo Press, 1981-82], 231). "This is the only first movement in Brahms's twenty-four works of chamber music . . . not developed into a sonata form" (H.C. Colles, *The Chamber Music of Brahms* [London: Oxford University Press, 1933], 31). "[This] work is unique in the chamber works in not having a sonata-form opening movement" (Ivor Keys, *Brahms Chamber Music* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974], 53; Brahms's "only first movement not in sonata form in the instrumental compositions" (Michael Musgrave, *The Music of Brahms* [London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985], 110).

3James Webster, "The General and the Particular in Brahms's Later Sonata Forms," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 61. See also Webster, "Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity (II)," *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (1979): 69: "In the Horn Trio, only the finale is in sonata form."
is "a leisurely, articulated rondo." Karl Geiringer, in apparent agreement with Frisch, is even more specific as to the movement's rondo-like construction, describing it as "a thrice repeated Andante, with two more agitated episodic parts." More recently, Malcolm MacDonald contends that Brahms "casts it in an extended song form, A-B-A-B-A." Adding measure numbers to MacDonald's scheme results in a traditional five-part rondo design as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1, MacDonald's implied formal scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>measures:</td>
<td>1-76</td>
<td>77-130</td>
<td>131-66</td>
<td>167-99</td>
<td>200-266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>length in measures:</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tight compartmentalization implied by this diagram, however, seems to work against the continuous, ongoing flow of the music. For example, two transitory passages preceding each return of A—measures 127-30 and 196-99—effect a smooth and seamless transition back to the return of opening material in measures 131 and 200. Melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic returns are curiously out of phase, obscuring any definite sense of return. Melodically, for instance, the violin anticipates a return of the ascending-fifth opening motive, Bb-F, in measures 128-29, slightly before measure 131 as MacDonald's scheme would seem to indicate.

Harmonically, the situation is a bit more complex. Referring back to the opening of the Trio, its first sixteen measures represent, in Schenkerian terms, the compositional unfolding of a dominant seventh above Bb. In a sense, this prolonged dominant seventh may be said to assume the position of a tonic, without, of course, functioning like a

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4Frisch, 96.

5Geiringer, 231.

tonic. Concerning the alleged point of return at measure 131, however, the dominant seventh is already in full sway, stretching from measure 127 to measure 146 and beyond, thus obscuring and overlapping the moment of return.

Rhythmically, too, measures 127–30 neutralize the impression of return at measure 131. In particular, Brahms augments the triplets of measures 127–28 so that, in measures 129–30, they become duplets within the prevailing $\frac{3}{8}$ meter. Next, as example 1 illustrates, duplets in $\frac{3}{8}$ meter give way to triplets in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, thus effecting a seamless transition that obscures a metrical downbeat at measure 131. Therefore, even though the opening melody reappears in full in the horn at measure 131, the rhythmic continuity and unvarying texture of the piano writing surrounding this juncture form a connecting link that overrides any sense of a clear-cut return.⁷

Example 1. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>measure:</th>
<th>129</th>
<th>130</th>
<th>131</th>
<th>132</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rhythm:</td>
<td>$\frac{9}{8}$</td>
<td>$\frac{2}{8}$</td>
<td>$\frac{2}{8}$</td>
<td>$\frac{2}{8}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A seemingly more satisfactory scheme is Marx's so-called "third" rondo form as presented in the second edition of *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition*.⁸ Figure 2 illustrates this scheme. To

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explain, HS (*Hauptsatz*) refers to the initial thematic section, while SS (*Seiten- or Nebensatz*) refers to thematic sections standing alongside the HS (SS1 and SS2). Both the HS and SS are well-defined sections characterized by melodic closure. (For Marx, the term *Satz* specifies a melodically closed structure.) In contrast, G (*Gang*) refers to an open-ended melodic segment lacking the closure of the HS and SS sections. Dotted lines separating the G and HS sections in figure 2 indicate this open-endedness as the *Gang* leads back to repetitions of the *Hauptsatz*.

Figure 2. Marx’s “third” rondo form (1841)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HS</th>
<th>SS1</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>SS2</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>HS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 3 represents an application of Marx’s seven-part rondo scheme to the first movement of the Horn Trio. According to Marx’s formulation, the melodically closed SS sections function quite differently from the melodically open G sections. Curiously, however, Brahms frequently blurs these functional distinctions in his Trio.

Figure 3. Marx’s “third” rondo applied to Brahms’s Opus 40, mvt. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>section:</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>SS1</th>
<th>(G)</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>SS2</th>
<th>(G)</th>
<th>HS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>length:</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In SS1 (measures 77–117) there are only fleeting suggestions of the G-minor (local) tonic that eventually closes this segment in measure 117. For instance, one could perhaps cite V-I motions in G minor spanning measures 91–92 and 94–95, yet the decidedly modulatory constitution of the surrounding music, not to mention the incessant triplet rhythms in the piano, effectively neutralize any sense of harmonic stability at these points. Instead, the music continues to drive forward relentlessly until measure 117, the next metrical downbeat, at which point melodic and harmonic closure at last coincide. In measures
115–17, the violin ensures melodic closure in G minor with a linear descent from 5: D-C-Bb-A-G. Supporting this harmonically is the C-D-G motion—IV-V-I—in the left hand of the piano. Thus, SS1 may be regarded as a closed structure, but one that postpones closure until the last possible moment, namely, measure 117.

As for the Gang (measures 117–30), it is of a radically different nature and make-up, seeming to anticipate rather than withhold closure. The agitation and restlessness characterizing SS1 gradually subside, giving way to music of much greater harmonic clarity and stability. Even though the perpetual-motion triplets continue without interruption into this segment, they no longer propel the music forward in the same way, serving here to reinforce a simpler underlying melody. As seen in example 2 (measures 117–20) the right hand of the piano simply elaborates the left-hand melody an octave higher.\(^9\) The stepwise melodic descent of the piano in measures 118–20 clearly recalls the nearly identical descent of the violin mentioned above. Unlike the earlier descent, however, this one is denied closure, pausing as it does on 2 (A) at measure 120 before making a second attempt to close on 1 in the music that follows.

Example 2. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1

\[\text{Example 2. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1}\]

As sketched in example 3, measures 121–26 seem to hold out promise for a close on 1, retracing the previous stepwise descent from 5 to 2. This time, however, the descent occurs in the violin, which effects

\[\text{Example 3. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1}\]

\(^9\)To simplify the musical notation in ex. 2, I have changed the meter from \(\frac{3}{8}\) to \(\frac{4}{4}\).
a full melodic close on G in measure 125. Yet the underlying dominant pedals in these measures subvert any sense of tonic resolution at this point. Moreover, the final portion of the *Gang*, measures 127–30, moves further away from G minor. The D pedals in measures 123–26 extend through measure 130 but no longer function as dominant pedals. These Ds, rather, are reinterpreted as thirds of a dominant seventh above Bb, thus preparing for a return of the main theme (HS) in measures 131ff.

Example 3. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1

Harmonically, then, the *Gang* resists closure and thus evokes the open-endedness specified by Marx. Yet its very character is that of a closing section, somewhat like the closing theme of a typical sonata exposition. This “concluding” character is especially apparent when considerations of harmonic motion and phrase rhetoric are taken into account. Referring to example 2, I hear measures 117–20 as manifesting a I-IV-V progression within a local G-minor tonic. A return to G minor at measure 121, coupled with a nearly identical reworking of the I-IV-V progression, reiterates the metrical downbeat from measure 117. As a result, an antecedent-consequent phrase grouping emerges from the repetition beginning in measure 121, thus heightening expectations for a G-minor tonic to complete the consequent phrase. Yet the tonic never arrives. As example 3 shows, measures 121–26
complete the first three stages of the antecedent phrase: I-IV-V.\textsuperscript{10} This
time, however, an F-sharp leading tone in the violin at measure 126 bypasses the tonic, thus preventing the consequent phrase from completing a motion back to the anticipated tonic.

Overall, then, Brahms's \textit{Gang} is far removed from Marx's description of the \textit{Gang} as the "very embodiment of musical motion." Everything about this segment indicates that the "musical motion" is winding down. By measures 123–30, harmonic rhythm slackens considerably, and the underlying D pedals make for an unusual harmonic stasis such that one hardly feels the need to return to a local G-minor tonic. Moreover, the \textit{poco a poco ritardando} in measures 125–30 seriously threatens musical continuity, nearly bringing the music to a grinding halt.

More globally, Brahms maintains the order of sections as specified by Marx (SS followed by \textit{Gang}) while radically exchanging their formal functions. In particular, Brahms's first SS (mm. 77–117) actually behaves more like Marx's continuous, open-ended \textit{Gang}. Likewise, Brahms's \textit{Gang} (measures 117–30) functions more in the manner of a concluding, self-contained segment that recalls Marx's SS. The result, in short, is an exchange of formal functions that seriously challenges comparison with a traditional rondo scheme.

This blurring of formal functions occurs on an even larger scale as well. I am referring specifically to the two SS sections in figure 2, Marx's "third" rondo form. From Scott Burnham's explication of Marx's scheme, we learn that there is to be a distinct difference in the amount and type of material comprising each of the two SS sections: "Marx describes the first SS as an initial attempt to come away from the HS and the second SS as a second, more conclusive attempt. The first SS is therefore of a lighter character, while the second SS is more consequential, more developed and more firmly rounded off."\textsuperscript{11} In the Horn Trio, however, this does not seem to be the case. As seen in figure 3, SS2 is considerably shorter than SS1. In fact, it is less than

\textsuperscript{10}As with ex. 2, I have changed the meter from $\frac{3}{8}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ to simplify the notation.

\textsuperscript{11}Burnham, 257.
half as long (20 vs. 41 measures). In addition, contrary to Marx's conception, SS1 is a good deal "more developed" than SS2.

In measures 84–85, for example, a series of descending thirds G-Eb-C-A½ is immediately developed in the violin at measures 85–88 and in the right hand of the piano in measures 89–94. Clearly, there is no passage analogous to this in SS2. Similarly, the developmental, stretto-like piling of motives between violin and horn in measures 95–100 finds no counterpart in SS2. Brahms therefore effectively reverses the functions of the two SS sections as Marx conceived them. In other words, the first SS is the more conclusive, consequential, developed, and more firmly rounded off of the two. Thus, to reiterate an earlier point, Brahms's music frustrates comparison with, and expectations for, a traditional rondo scheme.

**From Manifest Rondo to Latent Sonata**

Apart from this shift of function, the SS sections in their present position—SS1 preceding SS2—suggest a structure more highly organized than either of the rondo schemes considered (figures 1 and 3). In general, these sections contribute to an overall tonal organization not unlike that prescribed by traditional sonata form, namely, the recapitulation of second-subject material in the tonic key. Figure 4, a traditional tabular analysis of the tonal plan of the exposition and recapitulation, shows that Brahms properly centers a return of the minor-mode, second-subject material (SS2) around an E-flat-minor tonic as conventional sonata form dictates. Certainly no rondo scheme—Marx's or otherwise—evinces a tonal organization of this sophistication.

Figure 4. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40 movement 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rondo (Marx):</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>SS1 - G</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>SS2 - G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sonata Form:</td>
<td>1st subject</td>
<td>2nd subject</td>
<td>1st subject</td>
<td>2nd subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stufen:</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>VI III</td>
<td>I♭ − Ⅳ</td>
<td>I♭ V♭</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One can see an even more striking sonata-form parallel by comparing the tonal organization of the two second-subject areas. The first occurrence of second-subject material (mm. 77–130) corresponds identically to Marx’s combined SS1-G segment indicated above. Likewise, the second occurrence of this material (mm. 167–99) is identical to Marx’s SS2-G segment. In addition, each of the second-subject areas consists of two subsections (Marx’s SS and G) that may be differentiated not only by thematic content (as in Marx) but by key as well. In other words, each second subject embraces not just one key but two.

Now in and of itself, this observation is hardly noteworthy; many second-subject areas embrace more than one key. From the standpoint of traditional sonata form, however, it is remarkable that the relation between these two keys remains the same even though the keys themselves change. As figure 4 indicates, the first appearance of second-subject material encompasses two principal key areas, VI (C minor) and III (G minor), in measures 77–130. Now C minor relates to G minor as a minor tonic to its minor dominant. When the second-subject material returns in measures 167–99, it now embraces two different key areas, E-flat minor and B-flat minor. The minor-tonic–minor-dominant relation, however, remains the same. Moreover, Ebenezer Prout documents this practice as a principle of nineteenth-century sonata-form construction in his *Applied Forms* of 1895: “When the different sections of the second subject are not all in the same key . . . we usually find that their relation to one another in the recapitulation will be the same as in the exposition.”

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12In his analysis of this movement, for example, Tovey comments on its succession of key areas, describing them as “new and delicate (andante 2/4 in Eb; ‘piu mosso’ 9/8 in C minor and G minor; andante again in Eb; ‘piu mosso’ in Eb minor and Bb minor, so as to lead to andante in Gb, with a dramatic crescendo leading to a climax in the tonic [Eb major] followed by a solemn dying away)” (“Brahms’s Chamber Music” [1929], in *The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays*, 249). As I will suggest in a moment, however, the tonal organization of the *piu mosso* “second-subject” areas is neither all that new nor delicate when compared with traditional sonata-form procedures.

the influence of traditional sonata form is undeniably present in this movement.

Of course, there is a difference between demonstrating that music is *in* sonata form and demonstrating that music comes under the influence of, or is conditioned by, sonata form. I have attempted to do the latter. In other words, I contend that this movement is not so much formed as it is *informed* by sonata-form principles. Yet my reliance on diagrams such as figure 4 gives the impression that, in order to count as sonata form, these principles must necessarily lend themselves to this type of tabular representation. These sonata-form tables, moreover, necessarily exclude much that is of crucial importance to the structure of this particular movement. For example, of the initial seventy-six measures that comprise the "first subject," allegedly grounded in E-flat major, at least half—thirty-eight measures—occur within the context of an extended dominant seventh above Bb, namely, measures 1–23 and 47–62. By subsuming all of this material within an E-flat-major tonic, however, figure 4 gives the distinct impression of an initial tonic stability clearly not borne out in the music.

Even more significant is the fact that these large swaths of dominant correspond to music unusually relaxed and restrained in character. Typically, of course, large-scale dominants of this sort correlate with music that becomes progressively more intense. Yet the first such passage, measures 1–23, does not rise above a dynamic marking of *piano*, which is further qualified by *dolce* and *dolce espressivo* markings in the piano and violin in measure 1 and the horn in measures 8–9. Radically, then, it is the dominant, not the tonic, that permeates music of an unexpectedly restrained and stable character.

Furthermore, in measures 47ff., the longer the dominant extends, the quieter and more subdued the music becomes, taking on a *smorzando* character far removed from the increasing tension one normally associates with a prolonged dominant. In particular, the *forte* markings in the horn and violin in measure 47 gradually subside, falling to *piano* by measures 56–57 in the horn and violin. The piano part follows the same dynamic succession as well: an implied *forte* at measure 47 gradually falls to *piano* by measure 56. This prolonged dominant, in fact, extends well beyond the return of opening material.
in measure 61. Brahms's music thus confers increasing stability on a harmonic phenomenon—dominant prolongation—usually associated with increasing tension. In context, the stability and restraint characterizing this stretch of music render a tonic resolution so dubious that it almost seems irrelevant.

While traditional sonata form unquestionably exerts an influence on this movement, it cannot be said to exert a totalizing influence unless one is willing to reduce the music to a lowest common denominator, shared by countless other works. As William Newman puts it, “everything original and individual about the work in question must give way to everything routine and standard about music in general.”

Likewise, Marx’s rondo scheme, taken by itself, does not do justice to the tonal sophistication of Brahms’s movement. Rather, it is the interaction of sonata and rondo elements that is form-defining here, not simply one or the other. As Carl Dahlhaus points out, “arriving at a clear-cut description is probably less to the point than understanding the ambiguity . . . as a formal idea in its own right.” In effect, then, we have come full circle, returning to a crucial premise, namely, that to say a given composition is or is not in sonata form says very little of substance about the music itself.

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14William S. Newman, *The Sonata in the Classic Era*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1983), 115. Carl Dahlhaus notes the same phenomenon from a slightly different perspective: “In the nineteenth century, the theory of musical form was supported by the certainty . . . that the formal features considered constitutive and essential in the individual work were precisely those characteristics whose emphasis, on the other hand, permitted the drawing up of schemata” (“Some Models of Unity in Musical Form,” *Journal of Music Theory* 19, no. 1 (1975): 3).

15Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to his Music* [1987], trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 104. See also p. 103 for the fuller context in which this remark is made. Specifically, Dahlhaus hits upon this idea of ambiguity as a formal principle in examining the opening of one of Beethoven’s early piano sonatas: “In the exposition of the A major Sonata, Op. 2, No. 2, the transition (bar 32) leads in orthodox fashion to the dominant of the dominant, but thereafter two melodic ideas confront each other; it is hard to decide which of them is the ‘real’ second subject, because of the way the mix of attributes is shared between them. It cannot be ruled out that the intended meaning of the formal structure is the ambiguity, rather than either one of the alternatives.”
In his analysis of the first movement of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in F Major, op. 54, Alfred Brendel seems intent on justifying its unorthodox form. Although he never once mentions sonata form, Brendel nevertheless fashions his analysis in terms of a dramatic narrative, a powerful heuristic common to many sonata-form analyses. Specifically, he implies that dramatic conflict is not confined to a central development section; rather, it is put off until the end of the movement where the two themes are at last permitted to interact: “The two principles [themes] that would have nothing to do with each other at the beginning have become inseparable at the end.” From this...


17 See B. H. Haggin, *The Listener’s Musical Companion* [1956], ed. Thomas Hathaway (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 262–63: “[The] first movement of Schubert’s Piano Sonata Op. 78 . . . is in effect a dramatic narrative, with the exposition presenting the elements of the drama, the development presenting their dramatic involvements, the recapitulation of the original substance of the exposition having the effect of a resolution of those involvements, and the coda providing final conclusions.” At roughly the same time, although from an entirely different organicist perspective, Schenker also likens the sonata to a drama: “The sonata represents the motifs in ever changing situations in which their characters are revealed, just as human beings are represented in a drama” (Schenker, *Harmony*, 12). According to Mark Evan Bonds, this imagery dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. Writing about sonata form in the 1840s, for example, Czerny likens the musical work to “a romance, a novel, or a dramatic poem”: “[If] the entire work shall be successful and preserve its unity, the necessary component parts are: first, an exposition of the principal idea and of the different characters, then the protracted complication of events, and lastly the surprising catastrophe and the satisfactory conclusion” (quoted in Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991], 187).
perspective, the only difference between Brendel's account and that of traditional sonata form is that the latter merely stipulates that the interaction of such themes is to occur earlier in the movement, namely, in the development section. Thus, Brendel justifies the unusual form by appealing to the notion of thematic interaction, a time-honored principle of sonata-form construction.

Now Beethoven's contemporaries probably would not have required any such special justification for this movement or for its supposedly unorthodox two-movement scheme. As Tovey speculates, "the contemporaries of Beethoven and Clementi would probably have said that Beethoven's Op. 54 was a small work consisting of a minuet and a toccata; and they would see nothing calling for further explanation in the title Sonata for a group of two movements in the same key, in manifestly good contrast of form, and by no means lyric in style."¹⁸

Yet Brahms's Horn Trio is far removed from the world of Opus 54. Coming nearly sixty years later, Brahms's work stands in a much different historical position with respect to the codification and general acceptance of traditional sonata form. Dating from 1865, the Trio came into being at a time when sonata-form accounts of the 1830s and 1840s had become well-established models for young composers. Consequently, Brahms's music was subjected to much greater scrutiny than that of his predecessors. As Schumann wrote in an 1841 review of a recently composed sonata, "the sonata style of 1790 is not that of 1840. . . . [The] demands in respect to form and content are in every

¹⁸D. F. Tovey, A Companion to Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas (London: The Associated Board, 1931), 162. See also p. 90: "Haydn and Mozart do not scruple to give the name of sonata to works that have no movement in a form developed beyond melodic sections." Likewise, Beethoven did not hesitate using the term sonata for his own Piano Sonatas op. 26, op. 27, no. 1, and op. 54, none of which contain a movement in keeping with traditional sonata form. For an amplification of Tovey's comments on Opus 54, followed by a consideration of its two movements as an expressive doubling—"a form of repetition in which alternative versions of the same pattern define a cardinal difference in perspective"—see Lawrence Kramer, "Beethoven's Two-Movement Piano Sonatas and the Utopia of Romantic Esthetics," in Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 21–71.
way much higher now.” As a result, greater expectations were placed on Brahms to fulfill the sonata-form plan and to be the great upholder of the classical tradition. Certainly this pressure is reflected in Brahms’s response to Schumann’s famed “Neue Bahnen” essay of 1853: “The open praise which you bestowed on me has excited public expectations to such a degree that I do not see how I can come near to fulfilling them.”

To reiterate an earlier point, Brahms counteracted the prescriptive tendencies inherent in these new accounts of sonata form by fashioning his music as a self-conscious discourse on that tradition. To put it another way, Brahms was convinced of the limitations of these accounts to transmit knowledge of any real substance to himself as a composer of sonatas. Yet at the same time, he also sought a more dynamic and engaging relationship with those who seriously listened to his music. Thus, Brahms disguises his musical discourse in a relatively (if not entirely) unknown genre, the horn trio, to distance himself from the sonata-form tradition and his listeners from their sonata-form expectations. In so doing, he indirectly communicates his resistance to the constraints imposed by a rarely challenged musical institution of that time—traditional sonata form—while simultaneously inviting his listeners to respond.

Some of these listeners were decidedly enthusiastic. In fact, Brahms’s friend Albert Dietrich reported that the Trio made a very strong and favorable impression on its audience during its first public performance in December 1865: “Everyone was deeply impressed by


21 See Jeffrey Kallberg, “The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin’s Nocturne in G Minor,” 19th-Century Music 11, no. 3 (1988): 243. Kallberg explains genre as a force that “guides the responses of listeners”: “The choice of genre by a composer and its identification by the listener establish the framework for the communication of meaning. The genre institutes . . . a frame that consequently affects the decisions made by the composer in writing the work and the listener in hearing the work.”
the horn trio and by its originality and romanticism.”22 Yet others were considerably less favorably disposed to the work. At a performance roughly four years later, the work was much less well received. Clara Schumann’s diary entry of 19 January 1870 reads, in part, “I played Johannes’ Horn trio—it went very well, but was not at all favorably received,—and that pained us greatly on his account. The people did not understand this truly spirited, and thoroughly interesting work, in spite of the fact that the first movement, for example, is full of the most ingratiating melodies.”23 The reaction of this later audience perhaps suggests a growing unwillingness to accept Brahms’s work because it seemed too distant from the sonata form they had come to expect, especially from a composer who continued to write in the classical genres.

Certainly the most daunting of these classical genres from Brahms’s standpoint were the string quartet and symphony. Concerning the string quartet in the nineteenth century, Friedhelm Krummacher maintains that there was “scarcely another genre in which the standards set by the Classical masterpieces were so domineering.”24 As for the symphony, an anonymous review appearing in 1833 in the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung stated that “whoever now comes forward with a new symphony has undertaken something great and dangerous: it requires courage even if the requisite knowledge and skills are really there. The art-works of Beethoven have placed this genre of music on a height above which it scarcely seems possible to climb.”25


23Ibid., 113.


As is well known and documented, Brahms refrained from publishing a string quartet or symphony until his fourth decade. Of course, the understandably intimidating works of Beethoven in both genres may have slowed progress, but I believe another reason for Brahms's delay resides in the genres themselves. That is, among the classical genres, the string quartet and the symphony became most closely associated with sonata form by the mid-nineteenth century. No doubt due to its increasing codification, sonata form became standard procedure for a work seriously seeking to engage the classical tradition. Accordingly, then, sonata-form expectations were extended to embrace other genres as well, genres in which the rhetoric of sonata form was neither appropriate nor relevant. As a result, there developed a somewhat confusing relationship between the particular musical work and its more general type, a "problematic . . . clash between an individual work and the general category [genre] to which it might belong." In other words, expectations arose that were not always consistent with the genre under investigation.

Brahms's Horn Trio is a case in point. Frisch, Webster, and others seem to expect that Brahms will follow the traditions of a particular genre, namely, the late-eighteenth-century string quartets of Haydn and Mozart. Therefore, they expect Brahms to follow the sonata-form plan traditionally associated with one of the most popular nonorchestral genres of the eighteenth century. Too many departures from the expected sonata form, however, lead these writers to conclude that Brahms has broken his end of the bargain, so to speak. Thus, they

26Brahms's two String Quartets op. 51 were published in 1873, though he began working on them about 1865—the year of the Horn Trio. Brahms apparently drafted a number of string quartets prior to this time, however. The long-awaited Symphony no. 1 in C Minor, op. 68, was not published until 1876, yet its first movement already existed as early as 1862. As Hans-Hubert Schönzeler points out, "Clara Schumann had already seen a score of the first movement in 1862, and there are indications that thoughts of the Symphony had occupied Brahms as early as 1858–9. On and off Brahms thus had worked on the Symphony over a period of about sixteen years" (Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, Of German Music: A Symposium [London: Oswald Wolff; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976], 226).

27Kallberg, 240.
dismiss the movement as an anomaly among the composer’s twenty-four published chamber works, claiming it to be the only such first movement not in sonata form.

Yet the Horn Trio is quite distant from the world of the string quartet and the very specific structural expectations to which that genre gives rise. More likely, it belongs to a genre considerably less regulated as to form, allowing for a much greater diversity of style. These qualities are ideally embodied in the genre of the piano trio. As Basil Smallman notes in his study of the genre,

the [piano] trio genre has tended, throughout its development, to reflect microcosmically major aspects of other forms of music: initially, as we have seen, the classical sonata, the symphony, the concerto, the string quartet, and opera; and subsequently, after about 1830, the keyboard miniature, the solo song, the grand romantic concerto, and a variety of other instrumental forms of a dramatic, lyrical, or virtuosic character. Thus, it is hardly possible to identify a single set of techniques which is uniformly applicable to the genre.28

In thus rejecting a sonata-form interpretation, Frisch, Webster, and others reveal that their expectations are inconsistent with the genre at hand. In other words, they mistakenly expect one genre—the piano trio—to fulfill the requirements of an altogether different one—the string quartet.

Strictly speaking, however, Brahms’s Horn Trio is even some distance away from the piano trio by virtue of its unique instrumentation. At the time he composed it, for example, there were apparently no other works of its type: “When he wrote this Trio during the early summer of 1865, Brahms had few models for the unusual combination of piano, violin and horn, there being no previous horn trio and no sonatas for horn and piano other than the Beethoven Op. 17, in F Major (usually played by the cello) and unknown sonatas by

28Smallman, 82.
Thompson, *Re-forming Brahms* 83

Lessel and Bernsdorf," which appeared in the mid-1850s.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, at this time, the horn trio is a genre without precedent. Standing in no particular tradition, it carries with it no particular structural expectations—at least no *established* ones—as did both the symphony and string quartet. As such, it would appear to be an ideal framework within which Brahms might communicate something new to his listeners.

Yet what keeps Frisch and Webster from recognizing “something new” is that in many ways the Horn Trio signals a more distant past. For example, the two inner movements of the Trio—a sprightly Scherzo followed by an emotionally charged Adagio—call to mind the large-scale design of a number of Beethoven’s works, notably the “Archduke” Piano Trio and “Hammerklavier” Piano Sonata, to name only two. In addition, Brahms’s lively concluding movement in \textsuperscript{6} clearly recaptures the light-hearted spirit of many an eighteenth-century finale by Haydn or Mozart. Even its characteristically conservative title—simply designated “Trio” by the composer—does not seem to announce anything new. In fact, Brahms even permitted the substitution of cello for horn in the Trio’s first-published edition of 1868, thus strengthening its ties (however misleading) with eighteenth-century classicism in general, and the string quartet in particular.

In sum, then, the Trio *does* send mixed messages. While its external shape and the character of its various movements generally adhere to that of the classical genres, its first movement represents a marked departure from the expected sonata form. Yet this disparity is precisely what Brahms is after in order to recapture something of the tremendous variety of forms and styles available to the mid-eighteenth-century composer.

**Diverting Generic Purity**

It is not insignificant that the first movement of Opus 40 is often

\textsuperscript{29}Drinker, 111. To this list might also be added Schubert’s *Auf dem Strom* for voice, horn, and piano; Schumann’s Adagio and Rondo, op. 70, for horn and piano; and the quintets for piano and winds by Mozart and Beethoven.
likened to a genre long abandoned in the nineteenth century, namely, the divertimento. Brahms’s biographer Walter Niemann, for example, notes of this movement that, “after the manner of the old divertimenti, it is made up of several sections,” while also contending that it “is otherwise constructed in the grand sonata form.”30 Similarly, in his survey of Brahms’s chamber music, Drinker contends that the movement “is not, as usual, in sonata form, but in that of the old divertimenti, with no development section.”31 Curiously, then, neither Niemann nor Drinker acknowledges the presence of divertimento-like features without also appealing to sonata-form rhetoric. Thus, there seems to be a tension between two conflicting and perhaps irreconcilable genres: the older eighteenth-century divertimento and the newer nineteenth-century sonata.

This tension between the generic past and present is manifest in numerous ways in Opus 40. Even Brahms’s use of the horn itself is both old and new. As noted earlier, the horn was virtually nonexistent in chamber music of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Yet Brahms’s unique instrumentation distinctly recalls Haydn’s early Divertimento-Trio for strings and solo horn, Hob. IV:5, as well as his keyboard quintet or Divertimento for strings and two horns, Hob. XIV:1, or even Mozart’s Quintet in E-flat Major for horn and strings, K. 407. Furthermore, Brahms discloses past/present tensions in his preference for the older natural horn (Wald-horn) over the newer, more commonly used valve horn (Ventil-horn), for which Schumann and Wagner had long opted.32 Moreover, Brahms maintains the same keynote, Eb, for


31Drinker, 114.

32See Clara Schumann: An Artist’s Life, ed. Berthold Litzmann, trans. Grace E. Hadow (London: Macmillan; Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1913), vol. 2, 248. That there was some resistance to the older type of horn is conveyed in Clara’s letter to the composer dated 22 December 1866. Writing from Coblenz, she assures Brahms that “the horn-player was excellent. I do not think he spluttered once, and that says a great deal, though it is true that he played on a Ventil-horn [and] would not be induced to try a Wald-horn.”
all four movements, distinctly recalling the tonal scheme of many eighteenth-century divertimenti. 33

Viewed in this light, the first movement of Opus 40 emerges as a musical hybrid out of step with the times, a pastiche of apparently anachronistic musical styles and practices. Yet this variety is precisely what the eighteenth-century divertimento is all about, at least in its initial conception: "In the 1760s and 1770s Divertimento was the principle designation for all nonorchestral instrumental music, including ‘serious’ sonatas and quartets. After 1780, [however], Divertimento became restricted to the more modest sense familiar to us: music in a ‘lighter’ style than the ‘serious’ mainstream genres.”34 As an example, all of Haydn’s string quartets through Opus 20 (1772) were originally called Divertimenti by the composer. As Webster explains, it was not until the 1780s that the title Divertimento gave way to Quartet, yet Haydn did not wholly embrace the newer title until the mid-1780s. More significant is the fact that Brahms acquired the original manuscripts of all six quartets in Haydn’s Opus 20, works he no doubt studied in great detail.35

Now the opening of Brahms’s Trio certainly reflects the “lighter” style typical of the later, post-1780 divertimento. Yet the music beginning in measures 77 and 167 suggests the more “serious” sonata and quartet style of the earlier, pre-1780 divertimento. Thus, by later

33James Webster, “Towards a History of Viennese Chamber Music in the Early Classical Period,” Journal of the American Musicological Society 27 (1974): 227. As Webster points out, “four-movement cycles beginning with a slow movement nearly always maintain the tonic.” Besides the Horn Trio, the Piano Trios in B Major and C Minor (opp. 8 and 101) and the String Quartet in A Minor (op. 51, no. 2) are four-movement works of Brahms that also maintain an entirely monotonal key scheme.

34Ibid., 218–19. See also Tovey, A Companion to Beethoven’s Pianoforte Sonatas, 90. As Tovey explains, “many of Haydn’s early sonatas and quartets were published under the title of Divertimento, which afterwards became applied, like the term Serenade, to important orchestral and chamber works in a festive style, with a number of movements ranging from 2 to 8. Beethoven’s Septet [op. 20] and Schubert’s Octet [op. 166, D. 803] are typical Divertimenti or Serenades on the largest scale.”

standards, Brahms clearly oversteps the bounds of musical decorum. As Niemann points out, “this first movement goes far beyond the long since vanished society music of the divertimenti, which was, for the most part, light and charmingly entertaining.”36 Yet I would contend that Brahms, in appealing to both the lighter and more serious styles of divertimento, wishes to remind us of the genre’s multivalence, thus restoring the compositional freedom it once enjoyed. In the same way, Brahms enlarges sonata form from a restrictive compositional or classificatory tool, allowing it to embrace a variety of musical styles and practices.

The first movement of Opus 40 therefore represents Brahms’s attempt to reconcile a number of diverse genres—rondo, divertimento, and first-movement sonata style—thus restoring the concept of generic mixture inherent in much eighteenth-century composition.37 In problematizing the notion of generic purity, Brahms affirms his distance from the prevailing nineteenth-century view that genre and form are essentially the same.38 Sensing that his works were bound to come up short when measured against an absolute standard of generic purity, Brahms goes so far as to mix allegedly disparate genres, even in “the bright spotlight of the first-movement position” where sonata form had become de rigueur.39

36Niemann, 272–73.

37See Kallberg, 245: “Mozart particularly enjoyed mixing genres in his instrumental finales: a number of his concertos finish with rondos that incorporate substantial references to different genres.”

38See Joel Galand, “Form, Genre, and Style in the Eighteenth-Century Rondo,” Music Theory Spectrum 17, no. 1 (1995): 29: “Nineteenth-century theorists tended to conflate form and genre in their systematic writings. Differences between sonatas and symphonies, for example, were less crucial than their shared reliance on sonata form. . . . Eighteenth-century theorists, on the other hand, concerned themselves more with interactions between form and genre. Two genres could share some formal characteristics and not others.”

39Frisch, 123. In context, Frisch reads as follows: “One senses that, outside the bright spotlight of the first-movement position, Brahms felt freer to give rein to his compositional imagination and tendencies.” Therefore, I would expand on Frisch’s
Sonata Form and the Question of Gender

Certainly one of the most disturbing aspects of the Trio for Frisch and Webster—from a sonata-form standpoint—is its unhurried, lyrical opening. Such a casual approach is certainly out of place in the sonata, that "vehicle of the sublime." As Ivor Keys points out, the Trio's opening evidences a "meditative lyricism unsuitable to questing drama." Of course, this lyricism soon gives way to the staggered, syncopated, almost recitative-like entries of violin and horn in the two nontonic areas, measures 77ff. and 167ff., creating a distinct contrast of themes. The problem for Frisch and Webster is not, however, that Brahms's themes are not sufficiently contrasting, but that they are out of order.

This idea of thematic ordering became a focal point in sonata-form accounts of the mid-nineteenth century. In volume 3 of *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Kompositionen* (2nd ed., 1848), Marx makes a clear distinction between the first and second themes of a sonata exposition:

[The] *Hauptsatz* [main theme] is the first to be determined, thus partaking of an initial freshness and energy, and as such is the more energetic, pithy, and unconditional formation, that which leads and determines. The *Seitensatz* [secondary theme], on the other hand, is created after the first energetic confirmation and, by contrast, is that which serves. It is conditioned and determined by the preceding theme, and as such its essence is necessarily milder, its formation one of pliancy rather than pith—a feminine counterpart, as it were, to its masculine precedent.

notion, claiming that the composer sought this same freedom even in his first movements.

Ibid., 293. Incidentally, the same procedure proved to be a barrier to critics' acceptance of the opening of Brahms's B Major Piano Trio, op. 8.

Keys, 53.

Here, Marx not only addresses concerns of thematic order but attributes a "masculine" quality to the first theme and a "feminine" quality to the second.

Apparently the first to express this difference in gendered terms, Marx would seem to have exerted an enormous influence on future generations of writers.43 The Leipzig theorist Johann Christian Lobe, for example, constructed a model in 1855 for the opera overture in which each theme is to represent a chief character in the ensuing drama. According to Lobe, the first theme represents the hero (den Haupthelden der Geschichte) while the second theme represents the heroine (Hauptheldin).44 More than thirty years later, Hugo Riemann included the gendered metaphor in the Katechismus der Musik (Allgemeine Musiklehre), first published in 1888: "As a rule sonata form is laid out with a strong, characteristic, first theme—the representative of the masculine principle, so to speak—and a contrasting, lyrical, gentle second theme, representing the feminine principle."45 Certainly the terms "masculine principle" and "feminine principle" hint at an increased essentialism that characterized a good deal of German music-theoretical thought in the latter nineteenth century.

Even into the twentieth century, writers continued to propagate the gendered metaphor. In France, for example, Vincent D'Indy's Cours de composition musicale of 1909 evidences an even more pronounced essentialism: "Force and energy, concision and clarity: such are almost

with me a pre-publication copy of this essay.

43See James Hepokoski, "Masculine-Feminine," Musical Times 135, no. 1818 (1994): 494: "With his authority amplified by his professorship at the University of Berlin, Marx's massive textbook [Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition] would be widely studied and adapted in the emerging institution of art music: by 1875 each of its four volumes had gone through from four to eight editions each." According to Marcia Citron, Marx's treatise "apparently retained the gendered description, through the fifth edition of 1879" (Gender and the Musical Canon [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 132).

44Ibid.

45Trans. in Citron, 135.
Thompson, *Re-forming Brahms* 89

variably the essential *masculine* characteristics belonging to the *first idea*: it imposes itself in *brusque rhythms*. . . . The *second idea*, in contrast, entirely gentle and of *melodic* grace, is affective . . . the eminently alluring *feminine*.”

Even as late as 1955, more than a century following Marx, the gendered description appears again in the encyclopedia *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*: “Two fundamental principles of humankind are given form in the two main themes: the active, extroverted, masculine first theme and the quiet, introverted, feminine second theme.”

Returning to Marx, it would certainly seem that his metaphor of gendered themes privileges the “masculine” and slights the “feminine.” In the passage quoted above, for example, he bestows on the “masculine” *Hauptsatz* a primary and determining function within a sonata exposition while relegating the “feminine” *Seitensatz* to a decidedly more constrained and servile role. Marx himself attests to the primacy of the *Hauptsatz*: “The formation of the *Hauptsatz* is the first result [Ergebniss] of the poetic idea, of the mood—in short, of the motivating impulse for the composition that is to take shape.”

Yet this disparity is not in keeping with the fuller context of Marx’s discourse. In fact, Marx follows up these observations with a summary statement—something like an “equal-rights” clause—whereby the *Hauptsatz* is not to take precedence over the *Seitensatz*. Although different by design, the two themes are to be essentially equal in stature. As Marx himself explains, “the *Seitensatz* is not just peripheral business, not just a secondary theme to the main theme, and thus claims, in general, the same development and the same space as the main theme.”

If this is true, as Marx claims, then why should it matter which theme comes first? What is to prevent the secondary

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46Ibid., 136.


49Ibid., 165.
theme from assuming a primary position, taking the place of the
Hauptsatz yet remaining true to the character and spirit of a Seitensatz?

I believe that Brahms entertains these questions most compellingly
in the first movement of the Horn Trio, for here it is precisely the
Seitensatz that functions like a Hauptsatz, serving as "the motivating
impulse for the composition that is to take shape." In other words, it
is the Seitensatz, not the Hauptsatz, that assumes a primary and
determining role within the movement as a whole. Moreover, this
Seitensatz not only serves as a point of orientation but as a point of
destination as well, very much in keeping with the romantic
predilection for cyclic unity. Burnham pinpoints this crucial aspect of
Marx's musical reasoning: "In a process in which each successive)section is in some sense derived . . . from the preceding section, the
initial utterance becomes—by default—a logical final term."50

While significant in itself, this reversal of Sätze is even more
remarkable when viewed in the wider context of Marx's writings on
musical form in general. The basis of all musical form, according to
Marx, is the underlying dynamic formula rest-motion-rest. By reversing
the relative position of Hauptsatz and Seitensatz, yet retaining their
original character as specified by Marx, Brahms enables a mapping of
Marx's rest-motion-rest formula onto the Trio's entire first movement.
To put it another way, Brahms ensures that the reposeful music of the
Seitensatz constitutes the opening and closing statements of the
movement, containing—or perhaps even constraining—the activity of
the restless Hauptsatz interjections that fall between them.

As if to problematize the notion of gender bias, Brahms's reordering
of Sätze undeniably privileges the "feminine" element in his Trio. Yet
I believe Brahms had additional reasons for fashioning it this way.
Specifically, Opus 40 is the first work to be started and completed
following the death of his mother in February 1865. As Musgrave and
MacDonald point out, however, the Trio's opening horn melody seems
to recall the opening theme from an earlier work, namely, the fourth
of Brahms's Opus 17 Lieder (for women's chorus, two horns, and

50Ibid., 172.
harp), composed in 1862.\textsuperscript{51}

As shown in example 4, which gives the opening melodic gesture in each work, the resemblance between the Trio and the chorus is apparent from the outset: both are marked “Andante,” both bear a key signature of three flats, both are cast in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and both feature subdued dynamics (\textit{piano} in op. 40; \textit{pianissimo} in op. 17, no. 4). In addition, a persistent dactylic rhythm—\texttt{J J J J J J J J}—prevails at the outset of both works. Moreover, Brahms’s use of the horn, rare in his nonorchestral works, coupled with melodies composed of gently rising and falling seconds, suggests even stronger parallels between the two works. Perhaps most remarkable is the character of the horn music itself, not the conventionally “masculine” hunting-horn style—on which Brahms no doubt draws in the Scherzo and Finale of his Trio—but a music of greater subtlety and nuance, bearing all the hallmarks of what the hegemonic culture to which Brahms belonged perceived and projected as being musically “feminine.”

Brahms gives an undeniable primacy to the “feminine” voice in both of these works. In the Lied, for example, Brahms uses a translation of the poem “The Death of Trenar” from Ossian’s “Fingal,” the opening line of which tells of a maiden mourning the death of Trenar, a chieftain, who has been slain by the Gaelic hero Cuthullin. Accordingly, then, the initial subject of Brahms’ music is not Trenar or Cuthullin but the weeping maid. Similarly, in the Trio, the opening music dwells not on \textit{den Haupthelden der Geschichte} but rather \textit{die Hauptheldin}—that is, Brahms’s beloved mother.

Yet Brahms goes even further in privileging his \textit{Hauptheldin}. According to customary, decontextualized interpretations of Marx’s gendered metaphor, it is the male, the hero, who ultimately prevails, having successfully overcome what Susan McClary terms “the feminine Other.” “In \textit{sonata}, the principal key/theme clearly occupies the narrative position of masculine protagonist; and while the less dynamic second key/theme is \textit{necessary} to the sonata or tonal plot . . . it serves the narrative function of the feminine Other. Moreover, satisfactory

\textsuperscript{51}Musgrave, 110; MacDonald, 176.
resolution . . . demands the containment of whatever is . . . marked as ‘feminine,’ whether a second theme or simply a non-tonic key area.”

Example 4a. Brahms, Horn Trio in E-flat Major, op. 40, mvt. 1, mm. 1–7

Andante
Violin
p dolce espress.

Example 4b. Brahms, Gesang aus Fingal, op. 17, no. 4, mm. 9–16

Andante
SSA
Wein' an den Fel - sen der brau - sen - den Win - de,

wei - ne, o Mäd - chen von I n - store! etc.

(Weep on the rocks where the storm-winds are breaking,
Weep, o Maiden of Instore!)

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52Susan McClary, Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 15. Elsewhere, McClary notes that “these ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ themes are located in particular slots in the conventional schemata of tonality and sonata, [such] that their respective fates are already cast before the composition begins. The ‘masculine’ tonic is predestined to triumph, the ‘feminine’ Other to be (in [James] Webster’s words) ‘grounded’ or ‘resolved’” (“Narrative Agendas in ‘Absolute’ Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms’s Third Symphony,” in Musicology and Difference, ed. Ruth Solie [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 332).
Yet Brahms radically reverses the paradigmatic plot, for in the Horn Trio it is precisely the “feminine Other”—that is, the first theme in E-flat major—that prevails at the end of the movement. As measures 254–66 reveal, even the final tonic cadences in E-flat (measures 258, 260, and 264), with their characteristically “weak,” second-beat resolutions, reaffirm the primacy of the “feminine,” thus nuancing McClary’s notion that “there are no feminine endings.” Therefore, if the Horn Trio is somehow feminized, it might go some way toward explaining why masculinist critics are uncomfortable with it, for here there are no “masculine” endings—or beginnings.

**Brahms’s Musical Discourse**

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), Henri Bergson outlines two types of knowledge that suggest two ways of approaching Brahms’s music. According to Bergson, relative knowledge obtains from orienting oneself around an object, viewing it from a distance—usually by way of words or symbols. Absolute knowledge, on the other hand, requires a much closer and more intimate acquaintance with the object. It entails first-hand experience and personal contact, rendering inadequate mere words or symbols. As Bergson explains, “one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.”

It is not insignificant that Bergson equates the unique with the inexpressible, for an object’s unique qualities tend to defy description by virtue of their very uniqueness. At the same time, however, these inexpressible qualities would seem by nature to preclude obtaining absolute knowledge of the object under investigation. As Stephen Kern asks, “If absolute knowledge, the goal of [Bergson’s] philosophy, is inexpressible, how can we write about it usefully?” Yet herein lies the

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53 McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 16.


55 Ibid.
genius of Brahms, for he fastens upon a purely musical discourse in which the communicatory power and logic of music alone expresses his absolute knowledge of—and dissatisfaction with—traditional forms and genres.

Certainly Brahms’s strategy is all the more compelling when viewed in light of late-nineteenth-century Viennese musical culture. By this time, the level of musical literacy among Viennese audiences had steadily declined. As a result, the newer generation became the consumers of guidebooks to the musical repertoire and program notes designed to be read in conjunction with instrumental concerts. As Leon Botstein points out, these writings “experienced enormous success in the 1880s and 1890s. Hermann Kretzschmar’s famous concert guide [the Führer durch den Concertsaal] first appeared in 1887. . . . The Vienna Philharmonic first felt the need in the 1890s to introduce written descriptive program notes [that] functioned as a translating mechanism.”56 Even those unable to attend concerts might now have the impression of actually attending, experiencing the music, as it were, vicariously.

This tendency for words to substitute for music—and eventually replace it—must have bothered Brahms, for an understanding of his music seems to require the active, participatory skills of music-making, not simply the ability to listen to, talk about, or even write about music. Certainly it is no wonder that those with whom Brahms consulted on musical matters—primarily Joseph Joachim, Theodor Billroth, Heinrich and Elisabet Herzogenberg, and the Schumanns—were all, of course, accomplished and highly literate musicians.

Yet Brahms’s music often proved problematic to even these musicians, suggesting that he maintained a self-conscious distance from even those closest to him. Brahms seemed determined, as Botstein puts it, “to rescue the elusive uniqueness of musical expression,” allowing

his music—in all its complexity—to speak for itself. 57 Surely Brahms's insistence on a purely musical mode of expression is strikingly modern, anticipating the work of Schenker, Hans Keller, and other twentieth-century metalinguists who rely heavily, if not exclusively, on music or musical systems to explain what music means. As Rosen puts it, "What Brahms had to say about his relation to history and to the past, he let his music say for him." 58 Consequently, we are probably ahead in contemplating the manifold ways Brahms chose to speak through his music rather than settling for what others have to say about it. Certainly Brahms's music stands as an open invitation to ponder the multiple meanings of a unique, purely musical, mode of discourse.

57 Botstein, "Listening Through Reading," 144.