THE SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTEXT OF BRAHMS’ OP. 1
AS A ROMANTIC-ERA SONATA

A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF MUSIC

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GRADUATION: MAY 8, 2010
Johannes Brahms wrote his first published piano sonata in 1852-3, but it was not the first piece he composed. Although his C-major piano sonata is labeled op. 1, he actually wrote the Scherzo op. 4 first, followed by the Sonata op. 2, and then the Sonata op. 1 (all works for solo piano). However, he chose to publish the C-major sonata first because he felt that he had “written something worth offering to the world as his op. 1.”

Although Brahms’ Sonata op. 1 is an early work in his compositional output, it is still an important addition to the piano sonata genre. The main focus of my research will support this claim by exploring the context and significance of Brahms’ op. 1 as a Romantic-era piano sonata.

The work is a monumental, four movement piece written in a symphonic style for the piano. Unusual for a young composer, the other piano pieces in Brahms’ early output (Sonata op. 2 and Sonata op. 5) are also of symphonic proportions. Coming out of the shadow of Beethoven’s sonatas, Brahms proves he is capable of writing in the piano sonata genre by immediately publishing three large-scale sonatas (his only piano sonatas) within his first three years of composing (1851-54). Because his early works are surprisingly massive, it is important to understand the context surrounding the op. 1 sonata. In order to place the work in a historical context, I will briefly discuss the events in Brahms’ life surrounding the composition of the work. To place Brahms’ sonata in a context of other compositions, I will discuss the piece in comparison with other piano sonatas of the time period. Because Liszt’s B-minor Piano Sonata was written during the same year as Brahms’ op. 1, I will compare these two sonatas, specifically

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the compositional techniques in each. I will also briefly discuss how Brahms builds on the tradition and style of Beethoven’s piano sonatas, specifically the *Waldstein* Sonata op. 53 and the *Hammerklavier* Sonata op. 106. Finally, to place Brahms’ Sonata op. 1 in a stylistic context of his compositions, I will specifically address its overall form, use of developing variation, and pianistic style using examples throughout the work.

The sonata is dedicated to the violinist Joseph Joachim, whom Brahms met while spending the summer traveling with violinist Eduard Reményi in 1853. Brahms visited Robert and Clara Schumann for the first time on September 30, 1853, and presented the op. 1 sonata to them. The work pleased the Schumanns and showed them Brahms’ early, symphonic style with a “lyrical quality that often brings the sonata close to the realm of the German Lied.” Schumann himself described the work as a “veiled symphony” in his essay “Neue Bahnen,” praising Brahms in October 1853. In addition to the essay, Schumann helped to start Brahms’ career by strongly recommending him to the publisher Breitkopf and Hartel. This tremendous support from Schumann was a turning point in Brahms’ life, and it launched his musical career.

Brahms met Franz Liszt in the same year that he wrote the op. 1 sonata (1853), which is also the year that Liszt wrote his own piano sonata in B minor. The two composers met in Weimar, and it was an unfruitful meeting. As noted in Karl Geiringer’s biography of Brahms, Geiringer is not convinced of the popular story that Brahms fell asleep during Liszt’s performance, but he does claim that Brahms offended Liszt by not being more supportive of his

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Liszt was initially impressed with Brahms, but required that he conform to Liszt’s own musical standards in order to promote his “new German” school of music. If Brahms complied, Liszt would help to launch his career. However, Brahms refused his offer, and by doing so, he “rejected an artistic conception that was in some degree derived from an extra-musical point of view.” Brahms’ future relationship with Liszt and his music can be seen as an outcome of this first uncomfortable meeting. The association between Brahms and Liszt is an important piece of history that helps to put Brahms’ Sonata op. 1 into a context of his life in 1853.

Frequently used terms in Brahms research include “developing variation” and “thematic transformation.” Developing variation is a compositional process that Brahms uses in order to continuously change small pieces of musical material, or motives. He develops the motive by altering musical elements such as intervals and rhythms. Thematic transformation, commonly used in terms of Liszt’s compositions, retains the melodic shape of a phrase while changing the context (mode, tempo, texture). A melody that undergoes thematic transformation may sound completely different than its original occurrence in a piece of music. Brahms uses both types of development and occasionally merges them together. In Walter Frisch’s book about developing variation, he proves how the first theme of the op. 1 Sonata contains motives that Brahms uses throughout the entire first movement. The descending two-note motive from measure two (example 1) is used as material in measure 39 for the second theme area (example 2), and also in measure 51 for another new theme (example 3). This type of compositional process could

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6 Walter Frisch, Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 53.
become static, but Brahms aims for “lyrical fulfillment” instead of merely development of melodic shapes.\footnote{Ibid, 56.}

Example 1: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, I, mm. 1-2

Example 2: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, I, mm. 39-42

Example 3: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, I, mm. 51-54

In reference to Liszt, Frisch directly compares Liszt’s B minor sonata and Brahms’ Sonata op. 5 (we can still apply this comparison to op. 1 because it contains the same type of motivic development), and states two differences between their compositional methods. Liszt transforms longer themes while Brahms focuses on small motives, and Liszt does little to prepare the listener for the transformation of themes. With Brahms, thematic transformation is a more
gradual process. Both pieces achieve apotheosis, a term Frisch uses frequently to describe the fulfillment of a theme’s melodic potential. Frisch places Brahms in a context with other composers by stating that he uses extravagant Liszt transformations within a sonata structure like Beethoven and Schubert. Frisch’s work on Brahms’ compositional devices helps us to put the op. 1 sonata into a context of other composers’ compositional processes.

Before discussing more detailed aspects of the sonata, it is necessary to describe the overall form of the piece. Brahms’ Sonata op. 1 builds on the tradition of Beethoven’s piano sonatas by using a four-movement structure (typical of Beethoven’s early sonatas). Each of the movements in Brahms’ Sonata op. 1 features a traditional form. The first movement, in C major, is in sonata form (with three themes before the closing) plus a coda. The second movement, in C minor, is one of Brahms’ first experiments in theme and variation form, a form that becomes one of his trademarks. The third movement is an E-minor scherzo and trio, and the finale is a rondo in C major (ABACA with a coda). The form of Brahms’ sonata is vastly different from Liszt’s B-minor sonata. The Liszt sonata is one continuous piece, which can be interpreted as one long sonata movement, or a three or four movement structure. The form has been a point of scholarly debate for years, unlike the straightforward form of the Brahms sonata. The concept of formal structure is a major difference between the two sonatas.

Brahms wrote the slow second movement in 1852 before the rest of the sonata, and he finished the other three movements the following year. Because the Andante of op.1 was written first, it is important to understand the compositional process and discover what sets it apart from the rest of the sonata. A unique feature of this movement is the text included in the music (example 4).

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Example 4: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, II, mm. 1-11

The text, “Verstohlen geht der Mond auf,” is from an old German “pseudo-folk-poem” about the moon and love for a young maiden. The text fits perfectly underneath the rhythm of the music, and the music has an eerie quality that is also fitting for the text. In an essay about the three Andantes in Brahms’ piano sonatas, George Bozarth focuses on the relationship between word and tone. He describes specific aspects of the op. 1 Andante and how its structure and thematic ideas mirror the poetry of “Verstohlen geht der Mond auf.” Bozarth draws correlations between the words in the poem and the harmonies, textures, registers, and counterpoint used in the movement. He suggests that “the minor mode combines with the ominous triplet motive, cadential dissonances, and Neapolitan digressions to create the mood appropriate for the moon.”

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10 Ibid, 349.
One of the most stunning moments of the entire sonata occurs at the end of the second movement. There is a low C pedal point underneath a lush texture of seventh chords as a duet line alternates between the soprano and tenor register (example 5).

Example 5: Brahms Sonata op. 1, II, mm. 72-85

Although there is no text at this point in the movement, the text from the last stanza of the full poem is “Zwei true’re Herzen sahst du nie,” translated as “Two truer hearts have you never seen.”\(^{11}\) Strict imitation between the tenor and soprano lines is perfect for the romantic meaning of the text. Bozarth uses the extramusical elements (text) of this movement and of the other Andante movements of the piano sonatas to prove that there should be a consideration of Brahms as more than a composer of strictly “absolute” music. Instead, he is “a tone poet whose lyric muse found expression principally through song, both with and without words.”\(^{12}\) In other words, the music does not rely on the program or text, because the verbal aspect of the poem is translated into music that communicates those ideas. By discussing the “poetic Andantes,” Bozarth expresses the need to consider Brahms as less of a pure absolutist. As musicians, this

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 351.
\(^{12}\) Ibid, 377.
gives us freedom to connect differently to Brahms’s music, and to understand his place in the Romantic era.

Taking a look at the larger scope of the work reveals several links that occur between the four movements. All four movements share the key of C major: the keys of the first and last movements, the coda key of the second movement, and the key of the trio in the third movement. Another link between movements occurs in the opening of the last movement; it is a thematic transformation of the first theme of the first movement. Brahms changes the rhythm to a faster, driving compound meter but keeps the opening melody and harmonies the same (compare example 6 with example 7). The second and third movements are also linked by thematic material; the lyrical descending thirds figure in the last three measures of the second movement is transposed abruptly at the start of the scherzo (compare the end of example 8 with example 9).

Example 6: Brahms Sonata op. 1, I, mm. 1-10

Example 7: Brahms Sonata op. 1, IV, mm. 1-3

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\[13\] Ibid, 334.
Now that we have established a general understanding of the overall work, we can discuss more specific elements related to pianistic style. Brahms’ Sonata op. 1 is frequently compared to Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata op. 106 because of the opening chords of the first movement (example 10). It is also often compared to Beethoven’s Waldstein Sonata op. 53, because of the movement from C major to B-flat major in the first two parallel phrases (example 11). Brahms was familiar with each of these sonatas, and actually performed the Waldstein when he was 15.¹⁴ Therefore, it is fitting that he would expand upon techniques that Beethoven used in his works.

A technique that Brahms frequently uses to develop a motive is canon, which happens for the first time at the beginning of the transition after the first theme in the first movement (example 12). Already, Brahms is developing the motive from the first theme with contrapuntal writing. Another example of canon occurs at the beginning of the development, where Brahms is using the second-theme material in canon between the top voice and the middle voice (example 13). These are only some of the many examples of canon throughout the sonata.
In addition to canon, Brahms uses another interesting contrapuntal texture at the beginning of the coda in the first movement (example 14).

Example 12: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, I, mm.17-21

Example 13: Brahms Sonata op. 1, I, mm. 88-91

Example 14: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, I, mm. 238-245
The left hand is playing material from the second-theme area in diminution while the right hand plays the original rhythm, and then the hands alternate material in measure 242. The effect is an increase in intensity as the motive sequences and extends upward in range while also increasing dynamic level.

Brahms’ pianistic style in this sonata features many of the same elements that he uses in compositions throughout his life. There is an abundance of thirds (a trademark of Brahms), as well as octaves filled in with a third. The opening statement in the first movement contains this pattern, as well as most of the third movement, and much of the finale (see examples 6, 7, and 9). Large leaps are common in Brahms’ piano music, and this sonata contains many of them. The final two movements have the most obvious examples. The leaps come in quick succession in the fourth movement (see example 7), and create a point of difficulty for the performer. However, the leaps add to the character and constant, youthful energy of the movement. The following example features a very fast and large leap of two octaves that occurs several times in the finale.

Example 15: Brahms, Sonata op. 1, IV, mm.199-200

Brahms is able to create an orchestral sound that is “equivalent of a Mahler symphony” at the keyboard. He does so by using a thick texture, and by manipulating the texture to include a wide range of sounds and colors. One example of thick, orchestral writing occurs in the coda of

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the first movement during a long dominant pedal point. This phrase presents a challenging technical demand for the performer to play the large left-hand chords effortlessly.

Example 16: Brahms Sonata Op. 1, I, m. 251-254

By exploring various pianistic styles and compositional techniques, we have come to an understanding of the style of Brahms’ Sonata op.1. However, all of these techniques are common throughout Brahms’ other works, not only in his early style. By using the example that Beethoven set for Romantic-era composers, Brahms added his own personal touches. In terms of pianistic style, he highlights thirds and octave technique, uses large leaps, and manipulates the texture to sound like a full symphony with a variety of sounds and colors. In terms of compositional technique, he uses developing variation to constantly evolve thematic material, contrapuntal writing such as imitation and canon, a folksong as text underneath the music, and unity of themes between movements. Although Brahms builds on the tradition of Beethoven, he does so in a Romantic context. In Christoph Wolff’s essay, he states: “As for Brahms in particular we are in danger of taking so-called historicist attitudes for granted without thoroughly analyzing impact and context. There is, unfortunately, a tendency to look for individual works or
isolated passages of an expressly retrospective nature rather than at the picture as a whole.”\textsuperscript{16}

Pianists (and musicians in general) need contextual knowledge in order to understand what makes a piece of music special. It is important to a performer to understand what makes one piece different from other pieces by the same composer, and from pieces by other composers of the same time period. Both musicians and audiences benefit from a comprehensive understanding of a work. Perhaps by exploring the historical events and Brahms’ relationship with other composers along with a stylistic analysis of the Sonata op. 1, we can now begin to view the sonata more holistically.

Bibliography


