Brahms, Rhythm, and the Renaissance

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Johannes Brahms’s deep engagement with the past contributed to his compositional style in many ways. This article considers Brahms techniques that look back to and expand on those of Renaissance composers, in particular metric conflict and cadences, voice displacement, changes in proportion, rhythmic augmentation and diminution, and the hocket. Examples are taken from Brahms’s Academic Festival Overture, Variations On A Theme By Haydn, Piano Quartet in A Major, and Symphony No. 3 in F Major.

Introduction

Johannes Brahms constantly had his nose in his books. He investigated the music of his own time and scrutinized the music that had come before his time. Like a magpie, he accumulated and consumed mountains of music, and music he could not buy he copied out by hand; through his conducting activities, he shone a spotlight on works that nobody had heard in centuries. Brahms’s work shows influence from many of these early traditions but also active involvement with them: he did not merely take Renaissance forms as structures for modern compositions, but also adapted ideas such as the escalation of rhythmic conflict directed towards a cadence, the fascination with proportion, the augmentation and diminution of a rhythmic cell, and the hocket to fit seamlessly into his own compositional style.

Most composers living between 1600 and 1900 dedicated themselves to the development of harmonic tension and release as a foundation for musical form. Brahms’s music includes this kind of harmonic structure, but also engages with many Renaissance ideas about rhythm that lay dormant for centuries. Whereas many composers of Brahms’s time employ the tension of harmonic dissonance resolving to consonance in order to construct a cadence, or the end of a phrase, Brahms also designs metric cadences by building metric conflict as a phrase moves towards its peak and reaffirming metric unity to complete the phrase. Brahms’s competing strong beats also have ancestors in the motet, a Renaissance choral style in which the text often lay displaced between voices. As any line of text has strong and weak syllables, the misalignment of the same text between voices would lead to a sense of conflict between strong syllables. Then as any line of music has strong and weak beats, the misalignment of the same music between voices would lead to a sense of conflict between strong beats and to a changing sense of the strongest beat, both of which are evident in much of Brahms’s work.

The Renaissance was an era in which proportion reigned queen, and Brahms likewise composes many shifts in proportion or proportional changes. For example, in the triple meter of 3/4, or waltz time, each measure contains six pulses divided into three main beats, or the proportion 1:3. In the double meter of 6/8, each measure contains six pulses divided into two main beats, or the proportion 1:2. Against the background of six-pulse measures, a shift from the proportion of 1:2 to the proportion of 1:3 can be a driving force in a metric cadence. A series of proportional shifts—for instance, a change from a group of 8 beats to a group of 4 beats to a group of 2, where the size of the beat group is halved in each change—can also propel a passage towards its cadence.

In addition to these similarities to Renaissance styles, the idea of rhythmic modes, born in the 13th century and dead long since, resurfaces in some form in Brahms’s work. He applies certain units of rhythm to multiple voices, sometimes in augmented form, in which each note within the unit is lengthened, or diminished form, in which each note within the unit is shortened. Treitler has argued that “the [rhythmic] modes are qualities of rhythmic movement”—as such, Brahms’s implementation of certain rhythmic units and their combinations delineates in part the character of a given section. One last Renaissance tactic that turns up in his work is the hocket, in which each voice contributes one note of the melody, and together the voices compose a melodic line. Though the hocket is not rendered exactly in his work, there are places where his use of several voices to build a line has a similar design. The ways in which

1. Douglass Seaton, Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 75.

2. Seaton, Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition, 72.

Brahms avails himself of all of these devices point to his profound relationship with and organic re-imagination of the past.

**Brahms’s Study of Early Music**

Virginia Hancock has put together an invaluable documentation of Brahms’s early music concerts. From 1857 to 1858, Brahms directed the court of Detmold’s choral society, presenting works by Rovetta, Praetorius, and Palestrina’s Missa Papae Marcelli. For his women’s choir in Hamburg, Brahms conducted Palestrina’s Gaude Barbara beata and Princeps gloriosissime, and works by other Renaissance composers such as Eccard and Gallus. During his 1863-1864 conductorship of the Viennese Choral Academy, his concerts brought forth more works by Gabrieli, Rovetta, Eccard, and Schutz. Several years later, when he became the musical director of the Music Association of the famous Viennese Society for the Friends of Music, he exhibited several more works by Eccard, Gal-lus, and Palestrina. The significant amount of time that he dedicated to these works awarded them fresh attention from both scholars and the concert-attending public and contributed to the establishment of the early music canon.

These performances were anchored in his avid study of early music. Brahms compiled cartloads of editions and copies of works by early composers such as Praetorius, Gabrieli, Gallus, Rovetta, Schutz, and Palestrina. Extensive markings in the scores bear witness to the true lengths to which Brahms pondered these scores—he was even meticulous enough to collect over 100 examples of parallel fifths and octaves. In addition to his personal study, he was involved in the editing, correcting, and advising processes for several major music printing presses.

Walter Frisch has explored this “deep and sophisticated engagement with the music of the past” and named it historicist modernism. In his view, Brahms was the father of historicist modernism, refashioning earlier styles with his own unique ideas, thus creating a continuous stream of artistic thought between past and present. This stream of thought influenced Brahms in much more internal ways than quoting a Renaissance melody or the structure of a Renaissance composition: unlike any composer of his time, Brahms wields rhythm—especially rhythmic conflict and manipulation—to develop his schemes and play his tricks.

**Metric Cadences: Rhythmic Conflict and Voice Displacement**

In most music from the 1600s-1900s, the listener leaves home and then returns, usually in the context of harmony and thematic material; Brahms uses rhythm to achieve these goals as well. One example is demonstrated in measures 57-60 of the first movement of the A Major Piano Quartet. With the expression of the second theme, the written downbeat (the first beat of the bar, usually the strongest) and the heard downbeat (the beat the listener hears as strongest) fall in two completely separate locations. Simultaneously, the rhythm in the piano, which is in duple time, opposes the triplets in the strings. These struggles serve to move away from the home that is the first theme. Near measure 119, though, the ties in the strings produce a slight feeling of rhythmic deceleration, while the piano seems to be in 3/4 in the left hand and in 2/4 in the right, creating confusion in order to more firmly establish the return of the united beginning of the piece, as the unfamiliar other cedes to the known entity of home.

Brahms frequently engenders rhythmic or metric rivalry between voices to build up to a cadence or other form of arrival, as well as a return, something that he shares with Renaissance composers. For instance, in Variation V of the Haydn Variations, the pattern of sforzandi, or stressed notes, that attacks the very beginning of the variation and continues throughout repeatedly confronts the downbeat by emphasizing the fifth or sixth eighth note of the bar, rather than the first. These confrontations escalate as the orchestra progresses through measures 216-225. At the point of greatest upheaval, in measure 220, we can hear the movement in 3/4 with strong beats on eighth notes one, three, and five in the winds, or in 3/4 with strong beats on eighth notes two, four, and six in the strings. In these measures, every single eighth note is stressed by several sections of the orchestra, reaching the height of conflict after a long build-up. The strong beats synchronize on the first beat of measure 222, only to then break into triple meter in the winds and double meter in the strings.

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5 Hancock, “Brahms’s Performances,” 126.
6 Hancock, “Brahms’s Performances,” 126.
7 Hancock, “Brahms’s Performances,” 126.
13 See Example 1.
14 See Example 2.
strings. In this variation, the metric play introduced at the beginning grows into full-blown rivalry and then relaxes into the arrival of a new section in measure 226.

Variation VII has a similar metric cadence. In measure 314, the woodwinds begin to play in 3/4; however, the heard downbeat, or the beat that sounds strongest, lies on the second beat of the measure rather than the first. Meanwhile, the other sections of the orchestra remain in 6/8. In the bassoons, celli, and bass, the heard downbeat falls on the written downbeat, but several sections, such as the violas and first violins, enter in 6/8 with the heard downbeat falling on the second beat of the measure. This metric discord waxes and wanes again as the movement progresses, but never resolves fully until the very last measure—the variation does not return home until the very last moment.

In the first movement of the A Major Piano Quartet, Brahms designs an instance of voice displacement similar to the voice displacement in Renaissance motets. In measure 193, the piano enters with the motive one beat before the strings do. The voices are briefly in accord in measure 198, but they then grow displaced by an entire measure in measures 200-201, to be finally realigned at the key return to A Major. This type of metric play was common in the motet, in which different voices often sang texts at different times, displacing the strong syllables of one voice from those of another. The strong syllables and beats might also gradually move closer together or farther apart, increasing or decreasing the displacement of the voices. Though the Quartet has no text, the colliding strong beats and evolving displacement between the voices have the same rhythmically unsettling effect.

In cases where the theme is displaced, appearing at different times in each voice, or where there are several meters manifesting themselves at once, one might question which is the “main” entrance of the theme or which is the “right” meter. In an article on rhythmic and harmonic ambiguity, Peter H Smith argues that while some scholars believe in choosing one correct interpretation, or at least establishing a hierarchy from the most likely interpretation to the least, multiple possibilities for interpretation are an intrinsic element of Brahms’s work. Smith goes even further to assert that opposing interpretations often drive a passage or an entire composition. Although he suggests that rather than attempting to hear several possibilities at once, the listener choose one possibility, it is the tension between the multiple interpretations occurring simultaneously that defines this type of Brahms passage and often leads the music through time and towards its close.

**Metric Cadences: Contraction of Beat Groups and Proportion**

As well as setting up competing meters between voices, Brahms frequently condenses the meter as he heads towards a cadence, often through the use of the hemiola, which switches from the proportion 3:1 to the proportion 2:1. One example of this appears in the third movement of the A Major Piano Quartet: while the left hand of the piano retains 3/4 meter, the other voices begin a passage that feels like 2/4 in measure 271. Eventually the piano relinquishes 3/4 altogether for groups of two beats, jumping ahead of the strings, and in measure 281, all voices land firmly on the downbeat of measure 281. In other words, the movement changes from three beats per group to two, creating the sensation of speeding towards the first beat of measure 281, at which point Brahms re-establishes the steady motion present in the rest of the movement.

A similar contraction of beat groups develops in the fourth movement of the Third Symphony on a much larger scale. Brahms writes a sforzando in measure 91 to throw the beat off and then strengthens eighth notes four and eight, so that the last eighth note of measure 91 in fact sounds like the first beat in the measure. Because of the sforzandi and other accents, we hear measure 92 in two groups of 4, measure 93 in one group of 8, measure 94 again in two groups of 4, and measure 95 in four groups of 2; in measure 96, the strong beat falls once more on the first beat. In other words, we anticipate the downbeat of 92 and metrically hear 4 + 4 + 8 + 4 + 4 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 1. This gradual reduction of beat groups intensifies the phrase to hone in on its close. We can also notice that a series of proportional shifts forms the foundation for this contraction: a group of 8 is halved to become a group of 4, 4 halved to become 2, and 2 halved to become 1. Likewise, after the first group of 8, there are twice as many groups of 4 as groups of 8, and twice as many groups of 2 as groups of 4. Throughout these shifts, however, each group relates to the same basic pulse—in this case, the eighth note—which looks back to Renaissance changes in the length of the tactus, or beat. In order to change temp,

15 See Example 3.
16 See Example 4.
19 See Example 5.
20 See Example 6.
a Renaissance composer would relate both the new tempo and the old tempo to a constant pulse, for instance changing from a beat containing two pulses to a beat containing four.\textsuperscript{22} Brahms takes this widely used Renaissance approach and develops it into a means to impel the passage towards its end.

Another fantastic proportional game similar to the one in the Third Symphony unfolds at the very end of the last movement of the A Major Piano Quartet, but this time with displacement between the voices to add to the effect.\textsuperscript{23} In measure 505, the piano places the heard downbeat on the fourth beat, and piano and strings pass this group back and forth several times until measure 509, in which the piano cuts it in half, so that it is now two beats long rather than four. The strings then echo the 2-beat long form, to which the piano responds with one beat, to then finally converge with the strings on the downbeat of measure 511. Again, Brahms reduces the beat groups proportionally to run ever faster towards the destination of the passage. We can also note that there are four groups of 4 beats, two groups of 2 beats, and one group of 1 beat, contributing to an increasing sense of urgency. But even upon the arrival and seeming relief of the downbeat in measure 511, the game is not quite over—almost as soon as the quartet converges on the first beat of the measure, the cello and left hand of the piano accent the second beat. The ambiguity lies in whether the groups are $4 + 4 + 4 + 4 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 1 +$ strong beat on the first beat of measure 511, indicating that the passage leads to a resolute alignment of heard and written downbeat, or whether the groups are $4 + 4 + 4 + 4 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 +$ strong beat on the second beat of measure 511, upsetting the finality of the first beat in favor of the force of the second. Even the target of the headlong rush that we experience is sometimes contested.

Brahms’s tactic of condensing beat groupings may in fact subconsciously influence the way the listener experiences time. In his book Shaping Time: Music, the Brain, and Performance, David Epstein cites a study finding that music in which many events occur during a particular unit of musical time or music in which these events are especially complex cause the listener to feel as if this unit of musical time is moving more quickly than it actually moves.\textsuperscript{24} Brahms’s technique of dropping strong beats more and more often will not only make the passage sound faster than the surrounding music, but might even make it sound like it is accelerating towards its arrival point. Epstein connects this to his view that Brahms made an effort to “construct the music so that one feels from the score and the sound just how the piece should go.”\textsuperscript{25} Composers often indicate the direction and character of their music through written instructions in the score, tempo markings, and above all through harmonic motion. It seems that in addition to harmony and in place of extensive markings or descriptive writing, Brahms uses the release from metric conflict to metric convergence and proportional tricks to indicate to performers and audience the rising action, the climax, and the falling action of his music.

### Augmentation and Diminution of Rhythmic Units and the Hocket

Brahms diminishes and augments rhythmic units in a way reminiscent of the rhythmic modes of the 13th century. Each rhythmic mode consisted of a set rhythm that could be applied to any melody; each was considered to have its own qualities, so that the use of a particular mode would outline the character of a passage. These rhythms could also be augmented to transpire more slowly or diminished to transpire more quickly. In measure 391 of the Finale of the Haydn Variations, the bassoons and celli repeat in double time the rhythmic unit that opened the movement, at the same time as the violins and horns play it in its original form; both groups play it on the same pitch levels.\textsuperscript{26} This also happens in the fourth movement of the A Major Piano Quartet.\textsuperscript{27} In measure 467, the 1, accented 2, 4 pattern that recurs throughout the movement is doubled: as the violin and viola play it in its original form, the left hand of the piano plays it twice as slowly. This layering of the same rhythmic unit at two related speeds continues throughout much of the movement. We encounter rhythmic units again in the second movement of the Third Symphony, where the celli and bass have a dotted quarter, eighth note motive, while the woodwinds have this rhythmic cell twice as slowly, that is, dotted half, quarter note.\textsuperscript{28} Brahms layers augmentations and diminutions in this way both to generate a sense of friction and to provide unity of character to the passage.

Reaching back to the Renaissance in another way, Brahms adopts a technique similar to the hocket in some instances; each voice contributes a fairly short segment to a broader musical line. For example, in measure 80 of the second movement of the Third Symphony, each string sec-

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\textsuperscript{23} See Example 7.


\textsuperscript{25} Epstein, Shaping Time, 258.

\textsuperscript{26} See Example 8a.

\textsuperscript{27} See Example 8b.

\textsuperscript{28} See Example 8c.
tion is responsible for one interval each ascending arpeggio. This forges one sweeping gesture out of the smaller brushing gestures of each contributing section. One of the most striking examples of something close to a hocket can be found in the opening to the Academic Festival Overture, where the violins and bassoons each contribute two eighth notes apiece to a melody. The sounds of various sections or instruments playing their own part of the melody are essential to it, as they add variety in color.

Conclusion

Brahms was not only a composer, conductor, performer, and editor, but also a scholar: he immersed himself in the music surrounding him and even more in the music of his predecessors. He dedicated a great amount of energy to bring these early works back into the open as well—before Brahms’s time, there was no classical music tradition, as the public only heard works from the present. During Brahms’s era, classical music began to look backwards; this was the beginning of the consolidation of the canon of standard works in classical music.

Brahms, however, went above and beyond looking backwards: he learned from the past, but also morphed some of these concepts into his own new ideas. His work applies the concept of rhythmic tension releasing into rhythmic unity to his cadences, using rhythmic conflict to push through a phrase and rhythmic stability to articulate its ending. One form of rhythmic conflict that appears in his work is the competition between displaced strong beats, similar to the competition between displaced texts in the Renaissance motet. Another way in which Brahms often leads into a cadence is through a quickening sense of the passage of time, generated by games of proportion and proportional change, which were celebrated by Renaissance composers. Like his forebears in early music, Brahms applies certain rhythmic units to many sets of pitches and at several speeds at once, but embeds these within the broader context of his 19th century compositional style. The hocket is yet one more Renaissance idea that Brahms develops, often formulating a longer musical line from a series of shorter pieces. All of these concepts that Brahms first drew from the Renaissance and then elaborated reveal that for Brahms, it was a two-way street: he maintained a dynamic relationship with the past, searching for compositional elements that appealed to him and then organically growing them into his own creations.

References


29 See Example 9a.
30 See Example 9b.
Example 1  Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet in A Major, Movement 1, mm. 57-60

Example 1  Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet in A Major, Movement 1, mm. 119-121
Example 2. Johannes Brahms, Variations On A Theme By Haydn, Variation V, mm. 206-226
WINDS

STRAINS

SYNCHRONIZED STRONG BEAT

EIGHTH NOTES: 1, 3, 5

EIGHTH NOTES: 2, 4, 6

G TRIPLE METER

STRINGS 6 Duple Meter
Example 3. Johannes Brahms, Variations On A Theme By Haydn, Variation VII, mm. 314-321
Example 4

Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet in A Major, Movement 1, mm. 193-207

STRONG BEAT

ENTRANCE

IN ACCO1

piu.f

STRONG BEAT

piu.f

KEY RETURN

dim.
Example 5  Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet in A Major, Movement 3, mm. 270-281
Example 6  Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Movement 4, mm. 91-96
Example 7  Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet in A Major, Movement 4, mm. 505-509
Example 8a  Johannes Brahms, Variations On A Theme By Haydn, Finale, mm. 391-397
Example 8b  Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet in A Major, Movement 4, mm. 467-485
Example 8c  Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Movement 2, mm. 108-116
Example 9a  Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Movement 2, mm. 90-84
Example 9b  Johannes Brahms, Academic Festival Overture, mm. 7-9