THE PERCEIVED INACCESSIBILITY OF BRAHMS’S DEVELOPING VARIATION

A Look into the Relationship Between Thematic Complexity and Musical Accessibility

by

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Abstract

In completing his four symphonies, Brahms was thought to have reignited a genre many believed perished along with Beethoven. Often regarded as Beethoven’s 10th, Brahms’s First Symphony began paving the path for future symphonists into the 20th century. Wagner however, was not as optimistic regarding Brahms’s symphonic achievements, equating the symphonies to glorified chamber music. In his article, “On the Application of Music to Drama,” Wagner denounces contemporary symphonies for their subtle melodies and intellectualized thematic processes, deeming the works inaccessible to a broader audience – a quality greatly at odds with the symphonic traditions and more congruent with chamber music. The basis of Wagner’s argument rests on an implied relationship between thematic complexity and musical accessibility.

However, Brahms’s Second Symphony and Second Violin Sonata were met with overwhelmingly positive reviews, especially for their easily comprehensible and intelligible qualities, even in spite of their undeniably complex thematic processes. The Fourth Symphony however, was received as the most inaccessible of the four symphonies, many concluding it impossible to judge after one hearing. Considering the reception history for these three works, associations of genre, and the overall expectations of 19th-century concert goers, this paper will argue that the perceived musical inaccessibility of Brahms’s music was rooted in the often dark and complex expressivity, stemming from musical narratives that deviate from traditional triumphant archetypes. Additionally, in inverting the symphonic narrative, as he does in the Fourth Symphony, Brahms effectively reinvents the sublime in its application to music, navigating away from delight and idealism and into the realm of stark realism.
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I. Introduction

The nebulous claim that Brahms’s symphonies are too “chamber-like” continues to serve as a subject of discussion in Brahms studies. Walter Frisch discusses at length the issues surrounding this observation, citing many critics who, for various reasons ranging from the brevity of the middle movements to the fragmented tightly woven motives, questioned the symphonic validity of Brahms’s symphonies, likening them to expanded chamber works. Frisch notes how “a Brahms symphony appeals more to the connoisseur and is characterized by modest scale, intricate, finely worked textures, and complex motivic processes,” which “contrasts with the broader dimensions, bolder melodies, and more direct appeal of the symphony.”¹ However, beyond the compositional similarities, there exists an array of implications rooted in this comparison that shed light on the broader issues of accessibility in music. Additionally, these issues cast light on the overall expectations of late 19th-century concertgoers.

Richard Wagner denounces Brahms’s first two symphonies without even mentioning Brahms’s name or a work in particular. In his 1879 article “On the Application of Music to Drama,” Wagner expresses how “what had previously been dressed as Quintets and the like, was now served up as Symphony: little chips of melody, like an infusion of hay and old tea-leaves, with nothing to tell you what you are swallowing but the label “Best”; and all for the acquired taste of World-ache.”² Wagner here suggests that Brahms’s use of melody is grossly misplaced within the context of the symphony and belongs in a chamber setting, geared toward a more educated audience. In other words, Brahms’s complex treatment of melody, frequently referred to as “developing variation,” may only be intelligible to the musically learned individual, thus

² Frisch, *The Brahms Symphonies*, 149.
making the works inaccessible to a broad audience – a quality greatly at odds with the tenets of the symphony as a genre. Additionally, Wagner lays these claims against the backdrop of Beethoven’s symphonies, which he declares, “spoke to all mankind” – a skill which Wagner himself believes he inherited.³

However, not one year after completing his fourth and final symphony, regarded as the most inaccessible of the four, Brahms completed his second violin sonata in A Major, which was received with much acclaim, especially for its “easily accessible and comprehensible” qualities.⁴ Brahms’s Second Symphony in D Major was also noted for its intelligibility even in spite of its complex thematic process. Julius Harrison expresses how this symphony does not contain “any subtleties of thought not appreciable at a first hearing.”⁵ In composing both the sonata and the Second Symphony, which are quintessentially Brahmsian in their motivic processes and renowned for their accessibility, Brahms effectively invalidates Wagner’s claim, forcing listeners and critics to reconsider the source of musical accessibility.

Margaret Notley explains that late 19th-century listeners expected musical works to “have the power to reach and uplift a broad audience.”⁶ Brahms’s music, typically dark and brooding in nature, creates an expressively and emotionally complex listening experience, often denying listeners the satisfaction of pure uplifting fulfillment. Bernhard Vogel states that Brahms “emerges with works stamped with deep seriousness to the point of unearthly darkness and obscurity…the general public, half terrified, avoids it.”⁷ The A Major Sonata and D Major Symphony however, both embrace an unusually joyous expressivity, adhering to musical

³ Frisch, The Brahms Symphonies, 149.
⁵ Julius Harrison, Brahms and his Four Symphonies (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 172.
narratives that remain consistently positive, while the Fourth Symphony adopts a narrative that concludes in utter tragedy and despair.

Considering the expectations of Brahms’s audience as well as associations of genre, this paper will argue that the perceived inaccessibility of Brahms’s music did not necessarily stem from motivic complexity, but rather from the pessimistic and somber nature of the music, stemming from musical narratives that often deviate from the more traditional triumphant plots. Furthermore, in inverting the symphonic narrative, as Brahms does in his Fourth Symphony, he effectively transforms the sublime, previously characterized by idealism, into an object of stark realism.

II. Associations of Genre: Chamber Music as Inaccessible

In order to grasp fully the broader implications of the “chamber music” comparison, it is necessary first to consider the function and role of chamber music within the context of late 19th-century Austro-German musical life. During the decline of liberalism in the final decades of the 19th century, chamber music was often perceived as a relic of the past preserved by the waning educated bourgeoisie and musically conservative composers, such as Schumann and Mendelssohn. The tendency was to view chamber music as a cerebral and compositionally complex genre, demanding a significant level of musical erudition from its listeners. To those who were not part of the educated liberal bourgeoisie, this complexity associated with chamber music translated to inaccessibility and exclusion. Frisch explains how “the anti-liberals tended to view chamber music as an intellectual, exclusionary genre.” In other words, to the conservatives in German-speaking Europe, chamber music reflected and embodied the values and beliefs

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8 Frisch, Brahms The Four Symphonies, 150.
maintained by the liberal bourgeoisie community, which were growing increasingly out of fashion.

Carl Dahlhaus describes how “in the history of musical performance, chamber music was in the main a private affair, and its key works were largely esoteric.” Notley expresses a similar sentiment, declaring the chamber style to be “directed at the connoisseur and therefore couched in subtleties: chamber music was considered the vehicle for the most rarefied realizations of music as sounding discourse.” Additionally, Dahlhaus includes a passage by Arnold Schering, which eloquently paints the 19th-century chamber setting:

Here, in the families of academics, of upper-eclelon merchants and civil servants, of the prestigious artists of a community, for all their wonted liberalism in politics, there reigned a solid conservative spirit, a wholesome urge to preserve and transmit received culture…The focus of their musical life was chamber music, performed in private domestic concerts by artists befriended of the family and attended by listeners who could be relied upon to possess discriminating taste…

These remarks by Dahlhaus, Notley, and Schering all emphasize elements of exclusivity associated with the chamber setting. Schering describes a small audience made up of educated professionals, gathered in a private home for the purpose of “preserving” and “transmitting received culture,” by means of experiencing chamber music. Therefore, it can be inferred that this aspect of exclusivity, rooted largely in the audience for which the genre is intended, is a direct result of the circumstance in which the music was performed. However, there is a compositional element that contributes to the perception of chamber music as inaccessible, which points to a relationship between motivic process and perceived musical accessibility in the 19th century.

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11 Dahlhaus, Nineteenth-Century Music, 253.
Notley discusses the connection between thematic complexity and chamber music, explaining that “Performance in a chamber…implied acoustics that permitted close attention to fine points, especially in the development of themes and motives.” Notley also cites a definition of chamber music taken from a standard encyclopedia published in 1885, which asserts that the chamber style, “conditioned by the allocation of chamber music for a narrow, consistently well-educated circle of listeners in a small room, is characterized by a more elaborate transformation and development of musical ideas, going into more detail.” This definition suggests that chamber music calls for a more developed and refined thematic process, which only musically sophisticated listeners would be able to discern and comprehend. Conversely, this definition implies that those beyond the educated class, who were not beneficiaries of professional musical training, would have struggled to follow the complex motivic process, thus deeming chamber music inaccessible and too intellectual. Furthermore, the perceived intellectuality of chamber music points to the suggestion that to 19th-century audiences, accessibility in music was largely qualified by a listeners ability to easily recognize motivic development – a claim that resonates with Wagner’s words on Brahms’s symphonies mentioned earlier.

As Brahms completed his first symphony only at the age of 43, his reputation as a composer prior to 1876 rested soundly on his significant output of chamber works. Frisch declares that “as a symphonist, Brahms emerged before the public late in his career”, and that his audience “was a public that through much of the 1860’s and 1870’s had come to view, and admire, Brahms as a composer of chamber music.” Notley agrees, “To Brahms’s

contemporaries, his true strength as a composer lay in chamber style… Early on, he mastered the
counterpoint, phrase rhythms, and thematic-motivic work that, to acculturated listeners, make a
tonal composition sound coherent."15 The many chamber works Brahms published in his early
period include a cello sonata, two piano trios, two string quartets, three piano quartets, a piano
quintet, and two string sextets.

In choosing to specialize in chamber music, Brahms perhaps developed the broader
reputation of writing music that was only intended for musically educated listeners, who also
tended to be generally well-educated members of the upper middle-class with liberal
social/political leanings. As Leon Botstein asserts, “Brahms’s ideal audience…were the
individuals who could either play or follow him.”16

Additionally, this choice to focus predominantly on chamber music demands a closer
examination into Brahms’s political affiliations. Notley notes “Brahms, of course, was a
Liberal… The motivic-thematic elaboration, chamber style, and reflective aesthetic experience
associated with his music were linked more generally with Liberal intellectual elitism and, by
implication, Liberal individualism.”17 Brahms’s close affiliation with the liberal community as
well as the implications of his significant attention to chamber music further paints Brahms as a
proponent of liberal politics aimed at satisfying the discriminating tastes of the discerning
educated middle-class. Furthermore, this relationship between Brahms’s music and his politics
fuels much of the criticism coming from figures, such as Wagner and his followers – a group
that, while artistically “progressive,” was characterized by more “conservative” political and
social views.

16 Frisch, Brahms Symphonies, 151.
17 Margaret Notley, “Brahms as Liberal: Genre, Style, and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna,” 19th
Century Music Volume 17, No 2 (Autumn 1993): 123.
III. Symphony as “Chamber Music”

By the time that Brahms finally emerges as a writer of symphonies, his reputation as a chamber music “specialist,” especially amongst Wagnerians would certainly have been working against him. When considering the traditions of chamber music as well as the political associations of the genre, it is clear that the comparison of Brahms’s symphonies to chamber music encompasses more than the similar musical or compositional qualities. Frisch remarks, “The notions of symphony-as-democratic and chamber-music-as-elitist, and the selection of Brahms as a target for criticism, reflect the powerful tug of values between the newer right wing, populist, radical movement and the older bourgeois establishment of Austrian Liberalism.” In other words, this comparison was by and large a political statement aimed at criticizing Brahms’s symphonies for being inaccessible to a broader audience, thus supporting the Liberal agenda.

However, this is certainly not to suggest that there exist no musical qualities that resemble chamber music in the symphonies. In fact, Wagner’s criticisms, although shrouded in political overtones, are based almost entirely on his denouncement of Brahms’s treatment of melody and motivic development. Wagner notes that Brahms brings with him to the symphony the same technique of motivic development used primarily in his chamber music. The symphony as a genre, which will be discussed in greater depth, epitomized the idea of public music, which was meant to be intelligible to a broad audience. Considering that chamber music was widely perceived as inaccessible because of its complex motivic process, Brahms’s symphonies naturally invite this criticism on the grounds of their undeniable motivic complexity.

In addressing this comparison, Dahlhaus expresses how “Brahms…tackled the analogous problem of combining the premises of chamber music with a will to large-scale form, by going

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18 Frisch, *Brahms The Four Symphonies*, 149.
to the root of the matter: the thematic development."19 After detailing the inner workings of Brahms’s Third Symphony, Dahlhaus uncovers a paradox between the sophistication of the motivic development and the simplicity of the melodic gestures, which he argues alters the symphonic experience:

> With its simple melodic gesture and tenacious omnipresence, it [Third Symphony] also manifests that urge to monumentality…The combination of simplicity and tenacity…conveys a certain “gravity” that is by no means sacrificed when coupled with extreme sophistication, a sophistication in which the central idea likewise directly participates with its changing harmonizations. On the contrary, simplicity and sophistication stem from the same source, causing the monumentality to emerge from within rather than functioning as a façade.20

Dahlhaus here adopts a more optimistic view of Brahms’s transplantation of developing variation into the symphony. Unlike Wagner, Dahlhaus seems to assert that in creating melodies from simplistic gestures, which reappear throughout the work serving entirely different functions almost to the point of imperceptibility, Brahms successfully combines “simplicity” and “sophistication” to create an entirely new concept of symphonic monumentality. Dahlhaus does not however, address whether the indiscernible reappearance of the melodic material hinders one’s ability to understand or receive the music – an argument Wagner surely would have supported.

Even those within Brahms’s circle tended to lean toward skepticism regarding the overall symphonic validity of Brahms’s symphonies. In her book, Notley includes two entries by Max Kalbeck, who supported Brahms and bitterly opposed the works of the “New German School,” and Rudolf Louis, both expressing similar sentiments regarding the perceived inaccessibility of the symphonies. After a performance of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony, Kalbeck remarks how:

> Brahms, despite his significance, is no master of the foremost rank, since execution prevails over power of invention. There is a lack of the great, noble

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popularity, the appealing to the common people, which, for example, distinguished Beethoven. Symphonies must really be understandable to the common people. Brahms’s symphonies will never become that.\textsuperscript{21}

Louis, in milder terms than Kalbeck describes the symphonies as having:

in content and [their] expression, a tender inwardness that brings the symphony closer to chamber music. Abandonment of that – in the highest sense of the word – popular, indeed democratic trait that distinguishes the Beethoven symphony in such an unparalleled way, and in its place, cultivation of an elegant aristocracy of taste that flatters the connoisseur.\textsuperscript{22}

It is noteworthy that both Kalbeck and Louis lay their claims without identifying in concrete terms specific qualities that support this claim of inaccessibility. Louis offers a vague reference to the experiential component of sitting through a Brahms symphony, likening it to the more intimate chamber setting, and Kalbeck notes Brahms’s prioritization of “execution” over “power of invention”, but both remain somewhat ambiguous in their choice of words and reasoning altogether. Neither Kalbeck nor Louis reference earlier claims of overly intellectualized melodic innovation.

Perhaps Kalbeck and Louis are less politically fueled than Wagner, whose argument is largely congruent with his political stance. However, I argue that both are possibly pointing toward qualities that are beyond melodic treatment, and that deal with the expressive aspect of Brahms’s symphonies – an element of the composer’s style, which will become increasingly relevant in the later discussion on the inversion of the symphonic narrative.

IV. Symphony as Public and Accessible

In order to understand the issues surrounding Brahms’s unique use of developing variation within the context of the symphony, it is necessary to discuss the tenets of the

\textsuperscript{21} Notley, \textit{Lateness and Brahms}, 145.
\textsuperscript{22} Notley, \textit{Lateness and Brahms}, 145.
symphony, as they existed in the somewhat precarious period between Beethoven’s death and the premiere of Brahms’s First Symphony. With the completion of his nine symphonies, Beethoven transformed the symphony into what Dahlhaus refers to as a “monumental genre,” which “manifested compositional ambitions of the highest order, the audience it addressed being no smaller than the whole of humanity.” Frisch expresses how “the symphony is fundamentally a public work, one that must project across the proscenium.” In other words, the symphony, continuously rising in status, was now regarded as a genre that demanded accessibility and intelligibility to essentially anyone who chose to listen – virtually the complete antithesis of chamber music. Compositionally, this translates to simple, bold, and memorable themes, which remain easily recognizable as they reappear throughout the movements.

In an 1887 review of Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony, the Berlin-based critic Paul Marsop praises the achievements of Bruckner, declaring him the heir of the German symphonic tradition, while simultaneously reducing the works of other symphonists, presumably Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. He provides a brief, yet important description of what he believed the symphonic theme should resemble:

Dashed off al fresco, the brush wielded by a powerful hand…these were nevertheless forceful and emphatic strokes. Nothing of those ladylike, elegantly intertwined pencil arabesques…whose melodies, pallid as forget-me-nots, never flow freely from a full heart, but rather always pass through a perfumed handkerchief…For a theme that is itself beautiful or interesting in purely musical terms is still not a symphonic theme if it does not also have an outstandingly vivid character, if it does not appear immediately upon its first entrance in such a clearly defined shape to the listener that he, even if he is only passably musical, can follow it readily and without difficulty in its more remote transformation.

Marsop here notes the expansive boldness and clear definition of Bruckner’s themes, which are qualities he deems necessary within the context of the symphony. Aside from the blatant sexism

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in using the term “ladylike” as a means of degradation, he then proceeds to demean the works of
other contemporary symphonists, highlighting the precision, complexity, and learnedness of their
themes, which are in turn highly “un-symphonic” for their apparent inability to speak to the
average listener. In other words, the themes and melodies of a symphony must be conceived on a
large scale not only to reflect the magnitude of the genre for which they serve, but also be able to
catch the ears of those with minimal musical training.

Additionally, the themes, according to Marsop, must possess a strong and bold identity so
as to remain easily intelligible through their development throughout the entirety of the piece.
Unlike chamber music, which stood as a symbol of elitism and exclusivity reserved for an
educated elite, the symphony evolved through the 19th century into an emblem of
democratization in instrumental music.

Notley offers a more pragmatic perspective on the demands for a universal symphonic
language that deals exclusively with the logistics of performance space. She explains how “An
auditorium suggested a crowd and an acoustically determined need to compose in a plain and at
the same time bold style.”26 It is important to note Notley’s use of the word “crowd,” as it
highlights the importance of universal appeal. The space in which a symphony was performed,
an auditorium or concert hall, was presumably large and required a substantial audience, thus
creating the need for musical accessibility. Notley continues, “writers viewed the symphony as a
more egalitarian genre by its nature, for the necessarily simpler but more colorful features of the
truly symphonic style made the genre more accessible to the wider circles the performance venue
already supposedly accommodated.”27 Therefore, on a completely logistical basis, if symphonic
concerts, taking place in expansive concert halls, were expected to attract mass audiences, the

26 Notley, Lateness and Brahms, 146.
27 Notley, Lateness and Brahms, 146.
appeal necessarily needed to stem from music that satisfied the tastes and desires of a broad public.

V. Symphony as “Sublime”

Another component of the symphonic style that contributed immensely to the need for accessibility was its relationship to the “sublime” – an association dating to the 18th-century. Before launching into a discussion on the manifestation of the sublime in the symphony, it is first necessary to consider the origins of the “sublime” and how it translates into musical terms.

In his 1756 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry*, philosopher Edmund Burke separates human emotions into two distinct categories based on reactions to the sublime and to beauty: “the passions which belong to self-preservation,” and the “passions which belong to society.”

In the latter, one experiences the pleasures associated with perceiving beauty, and in the former, one experiences the emotions that result from life-threatening circumstances. Burke asserts that the pain resulting from the passions of self-preservation morph into “delight.” He concludes by defining the impetus of this delight as the “sublime.”

The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough form any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime.

In other words, Burke suggests that the sublime stems from the delight we derive from the reality of facing an entity that has the power to destroy or harm us. Initially, one experiences pain at the prospect of this potentially life-threatening circumstance, which overwhelms our senses beyond

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29 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 51.
logic. Once we regain control of our senses, the pain, which accompanied the prospect of death or harm, is thus transformed into delight, and subsequently, into an experience of the sublime.

Early interpretations of Burke’s treatise related the sublime mostly with natural phenomena such as storms, oceans, and natural disasters. However, the sublime had been a familiar topic to Greek and Latin writers of the first centuries BCE and CE. In an anonymous treatise entitled *On the Sublime*, pseudo-Longinus, the name given to the writer, expounds upon the effects of the sublime in the context of style in rhetoric. He expresses how “the sublime not only persuades, but even throws an audience into transport… the sublime, endued with irresistible strength, strikes home and triumphs over every hearer… the sublime… with the rapid force of lightning born down all before it, and shown at one stroke the might of genius!”  

Pseudo-Longinus’s remarks, although dating back to the 1st century CE, are remarkably congruent with 18th- and 19th-century thinking in the context of art. As Longinus asserts, the sublime was thought to be able to “transport” its audience to a metaphysical state beyond logical comprehension, thus creating a thrilling experience of sorts.

Nicolas Henri Waldvogel declares, “The esthetics of the sublime was a theoretical construct that rationalized a sudden fascination for powerful, overwhelming, and even frightening experiences.” In others words, audiences in the 18th and 19th centuries were largely in search of this thrilling subliminal experience, even going as far as determining music’s worth by its ability to access the sublime.

In its application to music, the sublime did not appear until the 18th century, and even then, was thought to be achieved mostly by means of the oratorio. In Immanuel Kant’s *Critique*...

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of Judgment, he cites the oratorio along with the tragedy in verse and the didactic poem as vessels that could engender the sublime. However, the symphony began to appear as a potential contender early in the century, but faced a complex set of obstacles, which could not easily rival the oratorio. Waldvogel declares that “the valuations of the symphony and of the oratorio reflected different attitudes toward the sublime. Oratorios were traditionally based on moralistic, particularly Biblical topics. These moral and social factors played a large role in shaping the reputation of the oratorio as a sublime genre.”

Therefore, the oratorio was regarded as a superior genre to the symphony. However, as the potential for a subliminal experience by means of the symphony became apparent, the genre began to gain in stature, and would eventually exceed the reverence accorded to vocal music.

In his 1737 “Critische Musikus”, Johann Adolf Scheibe articulates the evolution of the symphony and its rise in status:

Ever since operas attained their full splendor in Italy, composers have seen that they be preceded by a type of instrumental music which...prepares the listeners for the full opera in a suitable and gratifying way. These works we call symphonies...Indeed, the symphony, in the state in which it is today, makes a specific impression by itself, and a skillful composer may express through it all the affections, the passions, and all the other subjects which allow themselves, with little effort and in the most explicit and agreeable manner in the world, to be really represented only in music.

Scheibe notes the changing role of the symphony, evolving from simply complementing an operatic work in the form of an overture or introduction to a fully independent stand-alone work capable of profoundly communicating to and moving its listeners. Scheibe then proceeds to make a more technical declaration pertaining to a qualifier of the sublime in the context of the symphony. He asserts “we may in fact gauge the merits of melody from our symphonies, in a very specific way. Melody is what makes these works beautiful, moving, expressive, and

sublime.”34 In other words, Scheibe places melody above all other compositional features, attributing a symphony’s ability to access the sublime entirely to its melodic innovation.

Scheibe then concludes by explaining the immensity of successfully creating symphonic works, declaring it a task only suitable for the most dedicated and gifted composers:

No composer will be capable of conceiving a symphony of the kind, if he is not impassioned and inspired, and if he does not fully possess the gift of melody. Technique indeed will not suffice. If a composer is not naturally impassioned and inspired,…he will never be capable of producing an expressive and sublime symphony. Accordingly, we can quickly recognize the spirit of a composer through a symphony.35

According to Waldvogel, this argument essentially defined the symphony as a vessel to the sublime, further expanding the importance of universal appeal and overall value of the genre. Additionally, Scheibe’s words highlight the use of the symphony as a means of exposing a composers true gifts and weaknesses – a determinant that becomes increasingly palpable in the decades after Beethoven.

By the end of the 18th century, the symphony as a genre had become almost synonymous with the sublime. In his 1771 Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste, Johann Georg Sulzer highlights the genre’s ability to capture the sublime: “The symphony is particularly suited to the expression of the grand, the solemn, and the sublime. Its objects are to prepare the listener for an important musical event…to summon up all the magnificence of instrumental music.”36 By the 19th century, the symphony, as Frisch asserts, “was esteemed as an important vehicle of the “sublime.”” 37 The growing fascination with experiencing the sublime combined with its increasing association with the symphony resulted in a genre that was immensely popular with

37 Frisch, Brahms Symphonies, 1.
19th-century audiences. Regardless of musical education, the sublime was an experience sought by all, and in music, the symphony became the prime object of its attainment.

VI. Reception History of Symphony No. 2 in D Major Op. 73 and Sonata for Piano and Violin No. 2 in A Major Op. 100

Despite the currents working against Brahms as a symphonist as well as the implications of inaccessibility associated with chamber music, both his Second Symphony in D Major Op. 73 and his A Major Sonata Op. 100 seem to contradict the general trends of reception with relation to genre in Brahms’s oeuvre. The Second Symphony was widely perceived as the most accessible of all the symphonies, especially as it compared to the first. Frisch declares that, upon hearing a reduction of the first and last movements, Clara Schumann “predicted a more telling success with the general public” finding the new symphony “more original than the first.”38 In a letter to Hanslick, Brahms himself even remarks that work is “so cheerful and lovely that you will think I wrote it specially for you or even your young lady!”39 Hanslick, who was somewhat reluctant to embrace Brahms’s First Symphony declaring it often “too difficult and complex,” was effusive in his praise of the Second Symphony:40

This novelty was a great, unqualified success. Seldom has there been such a warm public expression of pleasure in a new composition. Brahms’s Symphony No. 1, introduced a year ago, was a work for earnest connoisseurs…capable of pursuit of its minutely ramified excursions. The Symphony No. 2 shines like the warming sun on connoisseurs and laymen alike and it belongs to all those who long for good music, whether they are capable of grasping the most difficult music or not…The new symphony is radiant with healthy freshness and clarity. It is readily intelligible, though it offers plenty to listen to and think about.41

38 Frisch, Brahms Symphonies, 67.
39 Frisch, Brahms Symphonies, 67.
41 Musgrave, A Brahms Reader, 228-29.
Hanslick here suggests that in spite of the work’s obvious complexity, it still has the ability to reach an audience beyond the connoisseurs, thus truly fulfilling the symphonic tradition — that somehow, the compositional complexity does not interfere with the intelligibility of the work as a whole. This is important as Hanslick is both admitting to complexity as well as praising intelligibility, which would seem paradoxical in the context of 19th-century thinking and the symphonic requirements. Hanslick’s words are also largely at odds with Wagner’s criticisms of Brahms’s symphonies, which imply a relationship between thematic complexity and accessibility. By highlighting both the work’s compositional complexity and its musical accessibility, Hanslick’s claims on the Second Symphony rest on the assumption that musical accessibility stems from a source unrelated to thematic and melodic complexity, thus making compositional complexity and musical intelligibility mutually exclusive.

If we are to consider Hanslick’s claim, then we are left with the question of musical accessibility and its source in Brahms’s music. An answer can perhaps be found in observing the reception of Brahms’s Second Violin Sonata. Upon hearing the work at its Berlin premiere, the music critic and fervent Wagnerian Wilhelm Tappert wrote nothing short of a rave review:

The sonata for Piano and Violin (A Major, Op. 100) is a tranquil, euphonious, one could almost say an unpretentious work, - nowhere at all brooding and austere, from beginning to end pleasant contentment – no gloomy pessimism, but rather, cheerful zest for life… in earlier works, there were too many places that puzzled me… Not until this piece has the composer Brahms drawn nearer to me! The Sonata Op. 100 has nothing irritating, and anyone making first acquaintance with Brahms through it, astonished, asks: How could the musical world be resistant to Brahms for so long?!42

Tappert here notes the unexpected and remarkable accessibility of the work, which is even more puzzling than the reception of the Second Symphony, as this sonata is by every sense of the definition a quintessential piece of chamber music. In other words, when considering the

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42 Notley, “Brahms’s Chamber-Music Summer of 1886”, 55.
associations of the genre, accessibility was not a trait listeners would have sought when attending a concert of chamber music, making this review all the more extraordinary. Additionally, Tappert’s allegiance to Wagner and the New German school implies a bias toward the progressives and an aversion to the traditionalists, adding another layer of credibility to his overtly positive review.

Another critic in Leipzig expresses a similar sentiment, noting the sonata’s overwhelming sense of contentment:

[The sonata] represents a pleasing turn from the brooding to the agreeable…it is of intoxicating melodic magic. The violin sonata is the image of a soul that has gained a fully harmonious equilibrium towards the world’s storms. There are no strong contrasts, no brooding thoughts to be observed, only radiant love, most serene contentment…it is doubtless the most easily comprehensible music that Brahms has written in the chamber-music style.43

Once again, this review notes the expressivity of the piece, remarking on the absence of “brooding thoughts” and its easily comprehensible expression. In other words, this critic implies that the intelligibility of the piece is linked with its overtly positive emotional impact, and like Tappert, makes no reference to compositional techniques or melodic treatment. Bernard Vogel also expresses how Brahms “frees himself more and more from skepticism and moves toward a salutary optimism, and the sonata…is a very significant herald of this greatest transformation.”44

Similar to Hanslick’s words on the Second Symphony, Tappert, the Leipzig critic, and Vogel all seem to equate the accessibility of these pieces with a style of expression that impacts listeners positively, leaving them feeling uplifted. As mentioned earlier, this sense of bliss and delight was a primary goal for many 19th-century listeners. In the context of chamber music, this demand was perhaps less evident simply because of the private nature of the genre as well as the audience to which it catered. The symphony however, being the most public of instrumental

genres would have indeed called for a narrative that expresses triumph, victory, and delight – qualities that are also largely resonant with qualifiers of the sublime. In other words, any turmoil, fear, terror, or pain that takes place would need to be resolved and transformed into a state of delight, which, upon further analysis, is clearly reflected in the musical narratives of the A Major Sonata and the D Major Symphony.

VII. Analysis of Symphony No. 2 in D Major Op. 73

Before examining the musical narratives of these two works, it is first necessary to observe the work’s thematic complexity. In other words, if the argument that the accessibility of these works bears no relationship with thematic complexity is to be further solidified, it must be first be established that within the context of “accessible” pieces, Brahms still adheres to his signature compositional technique of developing variation, thus disproving any theories that imply otherwise.

In the first movement of the D Major Symphony, one need not look beyond the first forty-four measures of the first movement in order to digest the scope, magnitude, and complexity of Brahms’s thematic style. He takes only eight bars in what Reinhold Brinkmann terms the thematic “configuration” to lay the material that will serve as the thematic foundation for the whole movement (ex.1). Brahms introduces the first motive, a three-note alternating neighbor tone D-C#-D resolving to A, in the cellos and basses followed by the second motive in measure two, a triadic F#-A-A figure played by the horns, and finally in measure six, an ascending four-note stepwise scale beginning on A played by the flutes, clarinets, and bassoons. As evidenced by these opening eight measures, the primary motives heard thus far are remarkably short and, in their first utterances, presented in fragments.
Example 1: Brahms Symphony No. 2 Movement (First Movement, mm. 1-10)

After what appears to be the consequent eight bars to this opening configuration, the first violins and violas enter – initially appearing to take over the first motive. However, they quickly unravel into a descending arpeggiated octave line, while the rest of the orchestra slips into silence, leaving the first violins and now cellos almost lost in solitude, meandering on the dominant 7th chord (ex.2). After an ominous timpani roll where the movement appears to come to a halt, the winds take turn uttering the opening three note motive, both in its original three quarter note form and in an augmented half note hemiola (ex.3).

Example 2: Brahms Symphony No. 2 (First Movement, mm. 19-27)
Example 3: Brahms Symphony No. 2 (First Movement, mm. 31-
Example 4: Brahms Symphony No. 2 (First Movement, mm. 44-48)

Frisch notes the paradoxical nature of this theme, expressing how “Brahms combines two apparently contradictory impulses: expansive lyricism and dense motivic-thematic working.”\textsuperscript{46} In other words, a lyrical melody might typically imply a gesture that is born out of a single melodic idea acting as a whole unit. Here, Brahms introduces three motives that initially exist independently of one another, but then join forces to create one unified, lyrical theme that listeners will recognize as something new, thus challenging the notions and origins of lyricism. Additionally, the combination of recycled material in this theme only further calls into question the function of the opening forty-three measures as well as the identification of a primary theme. It is unclear whether this opening passage is acting as an introduction or whether Brahms begins this movement in what would be an altered exposition making this three-note motive a primary theme of sorts.

This opening theme is also but one of many instances in which Brahms manipulates the function of his motives as they reappear throughout the movement. In measure one, the opening three-note gesture acts as a sort of “upbeat” to what should be an opening theme, and then reappears at measure forty-four as a figure in passing disguised within the context of the “new theme.” The same can be said about the subsequent two themes that follow in this quasi-introduction. In the coda of this movement, Brahms conflates the opening three-note gesture and triadic figure to create yet again a seemingly new theme (ex.5). Brahms develops the triadic motive fully exposing its expansive lyrical potential, while embedding the three-note motive

\textsuperscript{46} Frisch, \textit{Brahms Symphonies}, 68.
underneath with a new supportive purpose. The triadic motive, appearing in the first violins, now functions as the main feature supported by the three-note motive in the cellos and basses. The three-note gesture now assumes an entirely different role, appearing as the groundwork of the strong measures in the phrase instead of its former role as an upbeat to a new melody.

Example 5: Brahms Symphony No. 2 (First Movement, mm. 477-487)

![Musical notation]

The subtlety and brevity of these primary motives allows Brahms to manipulate their functions and identities throughout the movement. However, the concise and the seemingly inconsequential nature of these themes creates an additional challenge in being able to identify their presence at instances such as measure forty-four and the coda. Considering the requirements for symphonic themes, Brahms seems to be doing the exact opposite in this movement with regards to thematic composition. In other words, where he should be presenting bold and memorable primary themes, he writes in brief enigmas couched in subtlety and ambiguity. It is this quality perhaps that would have led figures like Wagner to dismiss the symphonic validity of this work, deeming it too complicated for the masses and more appropriate for the connoisseurs.

If the compositional complexity of this movement is rooted in finely worked details that require close examination to untangle, the intelligibility is reflected in larger scale more abstract musical traits that call for the consideration of the overarching harmonic narrative. Aside from
the tempo indication, the single most obvious determinant of the musical character of a given piece is perhaps the key signature. In the case of Brahms’s Second Symphony, all four of the movements begin and end in major keys – D Major, B Major, G Major, and D Major respectively. As simplistic as this observation may seem, it is a trait that sets the second symphony apart from the other three. Even in the Third Symphony, composed in F Major, Brahms writes the third movement in c minor and begins the final movement in f minor, both reflecting somber and incredibly brooding characters before reaching a resolution at the conclusion of the final movement.

Brahms often includes movements in minor keys within a major-keyed multi-movement work, such as the final movement of the B Major Piano Trio. The Second Symphony however, is one of the few works in Brahms’s oeuvre in which each movement begins with a clearly communicated optimistic expression, ranging from serenity to excitement, resolving any conflict that arises before the end of the movements, which always conclude in the tonic major key. To listeners, this harmonic map provides the groundwork for a narrative that depicts fulfillment, which, to 19th-century listeners translates to intelligibility and accessibility. In other words, on the broadest and most basic compositional level, Brahms is delivering to audiences exactly what they crave and expect.

Julius Harrison asserts that Brahms’s Second Symphony “usually makes the most immediate appeal. And since dark patches of true Brahmsian austerity in the music are the exception rather than the rule, it is hardly surprising that the Symphony’s more patent qualities gained many friends.” Harrison here notes the unusual lack of darkness in the Second Symphony that often permeates Brahms’s music. Unlike Brahms’s First Symphony, each movement in the D Major Symphony begins without conflict, largely maintaining a contented

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47 Harrison, *Brahms and his Four Symphonies*, 172.
expression, and very neatly resolves the conflict that arises mostly in the middle of movements.

In the development of the first movement, arguably the darkest section in the whole work, Brahms takes listeners through a series of harmonic modulations, mostly to minor keys. Brahms develops the ascending scale motive by means of a fugato and continuously expands the other two introductory motives, before beginning the recapitulation where the triadic motive and the theme presented in measure forty-four are played simultaneously in a piano dolce dynamic. The coda, evoking a strong sense of intimacy and contentment, leads to a final scherzando section affirming the overt optimism of the opening, assuring listeners that the momentary developmental conflict has been resolved.

Harrison attributes the symphony’s intelligibility to its easily comprehensible melodies. He expresses how “that pathway to its success was strewn with melodies of a kind more easily grasped than the rhetorical themes and motifs found in the greater part of the first symphony.” However, as seen earlier in the analysis of the theme presented at measure forty-four of the first movement, Brahms only creates the illusion of “more easily grasped” themes. Brahms produces seemingly organic and lyrical melodies from preexisting fragmented motives, which only the connoisseur, who possesses a refined and trained ear, would be able to deconstruct and trace back to their individual motivic sources. The lay listener, enthralled with the sheer beauty of the music, may perhaps perceive the melodies as bolder units, thus missing the highly motivic nature of the melodies. In other words, Brahms could virtually fool listeners into believing this symphony is more symphonic by masking the underlying motivic structure beneath the guise of a unified melody, which is ironically the very compositional technique that Wagner accuses of being “un-symphonic.”

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48 Harrison, *Brahms and his Four Symphonies*, 172.
In Wagner’s terms, Brahms here conceals the “little chips of melody” by unifying them in what initially appears to be a disguised single primary theme. However, the overwhelmingly positive reception history of this symphony only proves that an understanding of Brahms’s motivic process in the context of this work is not crucial to enjoying and understanding the work.

VIII. Analysis of Sonata for Piano and Violin No. 2 in A Major Op. 100

The A Major Sonata, although clearer in regards to structure and form, also demonstrates Brahms’s motivic sophistication. The first movement, in ¾ time, begins with a four-measure primary theme in the piano, constructed of several motives that reappear within the context of new themes later in the movement. The first measure of the theme, consisting of three quarter notes, leads to the downbeat of the second measure, where the rhythmic consistency is interrupted by the lengthened dotted quarter note in b minor. Following this brief halt, three eighth notes lead the theme back to A Major, where Brahms then arpeggiates to an f-sharp minor dominant seventh chord, concluding the antecedent phrase of the primary theme (ex.6).

Example 6: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 1-4)

The violin then makes its first introduction with what appears to be an extra measure, where Brahms reintroduces the motive in the second measure of the primary theme, with a continued harmonic suspension in f-sharp minor. However, the dotted quarter note now functions as the beginning of a statement instead of as the conclusion of one, continuing through the three descending eighth notes into a diminuendo, which then leads to the consequent repetition of the primary theme (ex.7). This particular motive played by the violin will become increasingly
important as the movement progresses. By including an “extra” measure dedicated entirely to this short motive, Brahms alerts listeners, stressing the importance of this motive as well as possibly foreshadowing its recurrence.

Example 7: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 4-7)

After the consequent phrase of the primary theme, Brahms develops the motive of the first measure, presenting it in its original form, then diminishing it to skew the meter, creating a hemiola (ex.8). This particular method of development is remarkably similar to the way Brahms develops the three-note motive in the first movement of the Second Symphony, where the first violins and violas, then cellos, play the original motive only to unravel in an almost circular endless fashion.49

Example 8: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 11-14)

What may not initially grab the listener’s ear is the activity in the left hand of the above example where Brahms supports the melody with a simple two-note gesture. Here, this motive appears somewhat inconsequential. However, in the transition to the secondary theme, this two-note gesture reappears in an urgent declamatory fashion, both in the piano and the violin (ex.9).

49 See Example 2
Example 9: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 30-39)

Here, Brahms augments the motive in the violin part, giving each measure a single note before diminishing into a hemiola, while the piano maintains the quarter notes filling in the beats beneath the violin. Brahms repeats this gesture twice before finally transitioning to the secondary theme. Once again, Brahms demonstrates his ability to manipulate seemingly trivial motives to create entirely new functions almost to the point of imperceptibility. Additionally, this motive in particular will return with yet again alternative roles.

The secondary theme is built entirely on the motive introduced in the second measure of the piano and reiterated in the violin’s first entrance. What initially served simply as means of transporting the harmony from A Major to f-sharp minor, is now the foundation for the first half of the secondary theme. As previously mentioned, the violin’s entrance at measure five could perhaps be Brahms’s method of exposing the importance of this theme as it relates to the entire movement. The somewhat abrupt interruption perhaps makes more sense now that the expressive potential of this initially benign motive is realized. The secondary theme, first introduced by the piano, is in fact an identical rhythmic repetition of this motive, lasting eight complete bars before
launching into a more driven pointed double-dotted rhythm, which is then handed to the violin (ex.10).

Example 10: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 67-79)

In the concluding measures of the secondary theme, Brahms reintroduces the two-quarter note motive, originally heard in the left hand of the piano at the end of the primary theme area, now appearing in the climax and culmination of both the secondary theme and the closing of the exposition. Played first by the piano, Brahms pairs this motive with an eighth-note triplet figure, which is then handed to the violin, bringing the exposition to a close noted by an entire measure of complete silence. (ex.11).

Example 11: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 79-89)
It is worth taking a moment to consider the importance of Brahms’s decision to use material initially presented in a more concealed manner as the primary feature in the conclusion of this movement’s exposition. The character of the closing is both exultant and triumphant, indicated by the crescendo to forte dynamic followed by the prolonged arrival to the new key of E Major. This overt reappearance of the motive only further highlights the juxtaposition reflected by the two roles this motive plays in the primary theme area and at the closing of the exposition. In other words, the polarizing roles this simple motive assumes exemplify Brahms’s ability to use the same motive multiple times serving completely antithetical purposes, both compositionally and expressively.

Brahms creates yet another entirely new function for this two-note motive in the development section. After a brief fugato based on the motive presented in the first measure, the music erupts into a fiery series of modulations beginning in b minor, based on the closing material of the exposition. The two-quarter note motive followed by the eight-note triplet figure, then a means of expressing sheer success and triumph, now assumes the role of evoking anger and rage. Once the passion subsides, the violin is left in solitude uttering the two-note motive while the piano rejoins once again playing the same material from the closing of the exposition, now in c-sharp minor reflecting a lyrical contemplative and somewhat somber character (ex.12). This passage is repeated in the violin, before leading almost seamlessly into the recapitulation.
Example 12: Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 (First Movement, mm 138-146)

In its first appearance, this two-note motive served a supportive function that would render it utterly negligible. By the end of the development, this simple figure has evolved so dramatically, becoming the compositional vehicle by which Brahms communicates a wide palate of varying dynamic characters. Additionally, from a purely technical perspective, the mere fact that one motive can serve as many compositional functions as this gesture does, ranging from supportive to fundamental in various contexts, is in itself remarkable and quintessentially Brahmsian.

Considering more closely the implied narratives of the individual movements, Brahms is very clearly evoking a similar expression to that of the D Major Symphony. With the exception of the development, the first movement of the sonata remains largely in major, concluding victoriously in the tonic key. The second movement, a hybrid of sorts between the traditional slow movement and scherzo, is marked Andante Tranquillo, immediately indicating a sense of calmness. The movement begins in F Major with a sonorous lyrical melody and then shifts in character at the vivace section to a livelier, yet poised dance-like melody. The busy texture in the piano creates a sense of prevailing excitement, which then climaxes in a crescendo to forte dynamic before evolving back into the second andante. This section begins in D Major and is an
exact transposition of the opening andante before modulating back to F Major. This time however, Brahms fulfills the lyrical potential of this slow theme, extending the passage into a more overtly emotional statement. Brahms here epitomizes the element of intimacy often associated with chamber music, creating a highly vulnerable listening experience.

Before becoming too sentimental, the music quickly reverts to the quicker B section, now at an even faster tempo (*vivace di più*). The final andante, again in F Major, brings the music to a halt where the violin and piano appear to conclude on a perfect cadence in the tonic key. However, Brahms then interrupts this false sense of conclusion in F Major by leading to a cadence in d minor, implying the movement is not yet over. What follows is a short coda where Brahms brings back the material and texture of the vivace section to ensure a bold and declamatory ending in the tonic key.

The finale, constructed as a relaxed rondo, opens with a warm main theme that exploits the deep contours of the G-string. With each appearance of the theme, Brahms gradually increases the texture in the piano, evoking a new character each time. In this movement, Brahms does navigate toward a series of ominous and brooding themes, which naturally move the harmony toward minor keys. However, after the climax of the movement, the main theme is heard once again in what remains the most magical moment in the sonata. This time, Brahms extends the closing material of the theme so as to create a build up toward what ends up being an aborted cadence. The violin then plays the theme one final time in alternating thirds and sixths double stops supported by flowing triplets in the piano, bringing the movement to a dramatic and heartfelt conclusion in a warm long awaited perfect cadence in A Major.

Both the Second Symphony and the A Major Sonata adopt narratives that depict essentially joyous and fulfilling plots. In simpler terms, 19th-century listeners walked away from
performances of these works feeling uplifted and optimistic. Additionally, even the various conflicts presented in these pieces are somewhat necessary qualifiers in accessing the sublime. Alluding back to Burke’s description, the sublime results from encountering overwhelming conflict, which necessarily must be resolved. Brahms successfully creates narratives that both provide just the right amount of conflict without compromising the overall radiance of the music. It is these qualities that translate to intelligibility and accessibility to 19th-century listeners. Conversely, the inversion of such narratives where bliss and delight become unresolved rage and tragedy leave listeners feeling unfulfilled and pessimistic, thus translating to inaccessibility.

IX. Brahms Symphony No. 4: Inversion of the Sublime

Of the four symphonies Brahms completed, none was received with as much confusion and skepticism as was the fourth, completed in 1885. Even Brahms himself expressed concern about the piece’s viability with a wider public. In a letter to his good friend the conductor Hans von Bülow, who would eventually premiere the symphony with the Meiningen Orchestra, Brahms expresses doubt about whether the piece would even garner an audience: “I have a few entr’actes – which are customarily together referred to as a symphony…I wonder at the same time whether it would get much of an audience. I’m really afraid that it tastes like the climate here. The cherries don’t ripen in these parts; you wouldn’t eat them!”50 Although it is not unusual for Brahms to refer dismissively to his works, it is noteworthy that Brahms’s own concern, namely the accessibility of the piece, is what remained one of its most noted criticisms in the years following the premiere.

In another letter to his publisher Fritz Simrock, Brahms even goes as far as to question whether the piece will be published: “What are the practical reasons that I should publish a

50 Frisch, Brahms The Four Symphonies, 115.
version for piano four hands soon? In the first place, I really have no idea whether I will allow the thing to be published at all!”  

At any rate, the piece was received with largely mixed reviews, all the critics noting the pieces’ perceived inaccessibility, making it virtually impossible to judge after one hearing.

A critic from Frankfurt expressed how “no one could seriously expect to be able to do critical justice to the many inspired features of a work so polyphonic, richly modulating and complex in construction after a single hearing. Only a repeated hearing and study of the score can provide the opportunity for a thorough assessment and an objective judgment.”

Additionally, a critic writing for *The Hague* noted how “it would be impossible and conceited to pronounce a judgment on such a complex work after a first hearing and without any preparation.”

Unlike the positive reception of Brahms’s music when it is deemed “accessible”, the critics here note compositional complexity, citing specific qualities such as polyphony, structure, and modulation. In other words, Brahms’s “accessible” music is noted for its easily comprehensible expression, while his “inaccessible” music is criticized for its cerebral and compositionally complex qualities. As evidenced by the detailed analysis of the A Major sonata and the D Major Symphony, both pieces are grounded in a highly complex compositional system, exposing a flaw in the logic of the critics denouncing the Fourth Symphony. The starkest difference between the two “accessible” pieces and the Fourth Symphony relates more to expressivity, while the one quality these three pieces all have in common is in fact their compositional complexity.

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Taking a closer look at the narrative of the Fourth Symphony, it is immediately clear that it reflects virtually the complete antithesis of the Second Symphony and A Major Sonata. Even in regards to something as fundamental as key signature, Brahms deviates from traditional symphonic practices, choosing e minor as the key of this final symphony. The first movement is distinctive from the other symphonies in various ways, one of which is the dispensation of a repeated exposition. Additionally, unlike the first movements of the three previous symphonies, Brahms chooses to conclude this movement in a declamatory fashion in the minor key. Where the codas of the first movements of the previous symphonies act as a means of resolving previous tensions evoked earlier in the movement in order to bring the music to a somewhat reflective halt, the coda of this movement acts as the starting point of a driving force that blasts through to the end of the movement, concluding in a forceful plagal cadence. This choice indeed reflects the overall mood and character of the symphony, perhaps foreshadowing the tragedy that unfolds in the final movement.

What remains perhaps the greatest and determining deviation in the symphonic narrative is the final movement of the Fourth Symphony. Where Brahms could have redeemed the tragic nature of the work, he chooses to paint an even darker character, remaining faithful to his convictions. The most obvious oddity reflecting this movement is Brahms’s choice of form, harkening back to the baroque period. He constructs this movement in the Passacaglia form, basing the theme on J.S. Bach’s cantata Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich, BWV 150. After a series of roughly thirty variations, Brahms concludes the movement in e minor, leaving all the conflict, tragedy, and terror unresolved and now in the ears and minds of his audience.

Felix Weingartner reflects on the immensity of this movement and the singularity of its narrative:
The outer movements, however, are of downright monumental force, especially the finale…Here I cannot get away from the impression of an inexorable fate implacably driving some great creation, whether it be an individual or a whole race, toward its downfall. The latter resists and fights with all its strength, and once there is briefly a glimmer of hope, but all is in vain. Its extermination has been decreed and presses on with irresistible giant’s steps. The movement is seared by shattering tragedy, the close being a veritable orgy of destruction, a terrible counterpart to the paroxysm of joy at the end of Beethoven’s last symphony. 54

The language of these remarks is substantial for what it implies of what appears to be an entirely new symphonic experience. Weingartner depicts the image of a monumental inconceivable force imposing itself on the human race, and with one stroke exterminating humanity. In other words, Weingartner captures the sublime successfully engulfing its subject. Whereas previously, the sublime was evoked by the presence of this monumental force, followed by the delight of simply perceiving it, Brahms eliminates this delight and creates a subliminal experience based on the realities of tragedy and terror, as opposed to simply the ideas they evoke. In choosing to construct this movement in such an overtly pessimistic manner, Brahms effectively reinvents the sublime as it relates to music altogether, deviating from its previous characterization of idealism to what now appears to be stark pessimism and realism.

Considering the dark nature of this work, it comes as no surprise that audiences would have resisted its expression, deeming it “inaccessible.” It would of course be easier as a listener to simply dismiss what is essentially a reflection of the darkest aspects of humanity, instead of embracing the shattering narrative this work communicates – especially if the goal to 19th-century listeners was to seek fulfillment by means of an uplifting musical experience.

X. Wagner and Brahms as Heirs of the Beethovenian Symphonic Tradition

Weingartner concludes his remarks on the final movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony with a provocative comparison to Beethoven that deserves a thorough discussion. Both Brahms and Wagner claim sole inheritance of the Beethovenian tradition, and the completion of Brahms’s First Symphony placed him as a strong contender in this widely contested debate. In successfully reigniting the genre that many believed perished along with Beethoven, Brahms had indeed succeeded in filling the very large shoes Beethoven left behind. The many references to Beethoven’s symphonies embedded within the work only further solidified Brahms’s allegiance to and reverence of his predecessor, sparking much musicological scholarship that sought to further strengthen this widely held belief.

Wagner on the other hand, believed that the purely instrumental genre was indeed mastered by Beethoven who, Wagner asserted, confirmed the fulfillment of the genre with the inclusion of singers in the finale of his Ninth Symphony, thus resting on programmatic qualities:

Beethoven’s last symphony represents the redemption of music from out of its own, particular element into the domain of communal art…No further progress is possible beyond this work, for its immediate necessary consequence is none other than the communal drama, to which Beethoven has forged the artistic key.55

Therefore, Wagner’s claim to Beethoven stems from the belief that his music dramas were the continuation of the symphonic genre, which now necessarily called for extra-musical elements. To engage in a discussion on which of the two is the rightful heir is both futile and fruitless as the qualifiers for this distinction vary. Compositionally speaking, both Wagner and Brahms seemed to latch onto various aspects of the Beethovenian process, while simultaneously veering further away from the tradition.

Wagner’s criticism of Brahms’s symphonies reveals the value he placed on discernible melodies that can be easily recalled by the listener. Wagner believed that the universality of Beethoven’s language stemmed from his bold melodies that caught the ears of all who listened. Wagner himself expresses how “Beethoven succeeded in extending his melody, through the evolution of its constituent motif, into a great, continuous composition, which was nothing less than a single, perfectly coherent melody.”\(^56\) It is perhaps this extreme reverence of Beethoven’s methods that explains the logic behind the creation of Wagner’s leitmotif, which maintains the strong thematic identity of a Beethovenian symphonic theme.

Thomas Grey paraphrases Wagner’s explanation of leitmotifs, defining them as a “network of fundamental themes, analogous to the presentation and development of thematic ideas in a symphonic movement, but corresponding here to the process of dramatic action.”\(^57\) In other words, Wagner developed a thematic system in which each theme correlates with a specific character or object in the plot, which is meant to reflect the primary themes of a symphonic movement, presumably inspired by the symphonies of Beethoven. Grey asserts “the closest point of identification with Beethoven in Wagner’s own mind, however, was melody – encompassing principles of motivic organization and development…In the musical drama, the extension of an evolving ‘web’ of leitmotifs across the entire work is meant to achieve this same end.”\(^58\)

What is particularly noteworthy about Wagner’s leitmotifs is that they remain relatively constant as themes, even though they are by no means static. The idea was to create a link between the music and the dramatic action taking place on stage, therefore assisting listeners in learning the work and using the music as a unique means of accessing the drama. Arnold Whittall declares “from the purely practical point of view, it is obviously possible for listeners to

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\(^{56}\) Grey, “The Beethoven Legacy,” 84.


\(^{58}\) Grey, “The Beethoven Legacy,” 84.
reach the point where they know Wagner’s works well enough to remember what comes next, in word and tone alike…in essence the music is not being heard for the first time.” 59 In other words, in learning the leitmotifs as well as their respective dramatic associations, listeners were able to learn the work as a whole. Whittall continues, “The musical recyclings embody a formal discipline, in response to the aesthetic principle that coherent progress through a work by means of absolute and constant change is inconceivable.” 60 Whittall here seems to make a direct reference to Brahms’s developing variation, implying that Wagner’s system of leitmotifs is a response to the complex thematic workings he very often denounces.

Wagner therefore asserts his rights to the Beethovenian inheritance by means of a thematic system that undergoes minimal development, thus maintaining intelligibility to all listeners who participate – a trait he frequently praises in the works of Beethoven. However, in his thorough study of Wagner’s works, Wagner enthusiast Albert Lavignac perhaps inadvertently exposes the flaw in this theory pertaining to the relationship between thematic identity and intelligibility. Lavignac details the Bayreuth experience, chronicling every moment in the average day of the festival. He complains of the increasing popularity of attending Bayreuth, attracting audiences with little understanding of music:

Unfortunately, the Wagnerian pilgrimage has become as fashionable as it is to go to Spa, or Monte Carlo. I know perfectly well that is it impossible to make all the spectators pass an examination before permitting them to enter the hall, or to make sure that, either by their musical education or by the intelligent interest, which they take in matters of art, they are worthy to enter into the sanctuary; but it must be confessed that is it painful to hear the absurd remarks which show how unworthy is a certain portion of the public that now frequents Bayreuth. 61

Lavignac here highlights the necessity of some level of musical education in order to fully experience and appreciate Wagner’s music dramas. Additionally, this assertion further implies that Wagner’s music is perhaps not as intelligible or accessible as he perhaps believed it to be. If these works did in fact possess the ability to “speak to all of humanity”, as Wagner often declares, there would surely be no individual “unworthy” of this experiences predicated on the absence of musical education. If the accessibility of music were rooted in thematic boldness or simplicity, Wagner’s leitmotifs would indeed have caught the ears of all, even those without a thorough musical education.

Lavignac continues to elaborate on the daily activities of the pilgrims at Bayreuth, highlighting another peculiar observation that once again questions the relationship between musical intelligibility and thematic identity:

Many people employ their mornings in reading over the score, which they will hear in the evening...and these are not the worst employed. You can procure a passable piano at a large price, but you must be a millionaire to hire a grand piano! In every street are heard harmonious chords, and from numerous open windows float the well-known leitmotifs.62

Lavignac describes an audience that is actively working and studying for the purpose of fully embracing the musical experience, implying that this music requires scrutiny and prior knowledge in order to enjoy. He specifically notes the audible leitmotifs that fill the streets of Bayreuth by those who are financially able to rent pianos – to say nothing of the question of economical accessibility raised by Lavignac’s words. In essence, Lavignac paints a scene of fans that are willing to work for the Wagnerian experience and seem to view this perceived musical inaccessibility as a virtue, as opposed to the music of Brahms where it is deemed a fundamental flaw. The point to be take from Lavignac’s words, however is that the relationship between

thematic function and musical accessibility is evidently not as immediate as Wagner perhaps thought.

If Wagner’s music did in fact call for some level of musical education, this leaves the question of why there existed such a large discrepancy in the perceived musical inaccessibility of both Wagner and Brahms. If we are to consider the claim that the expressivity of the music maintained a larger role in determining its reception, the answer can perhaps be found in Wagner’s relationship with the sublime. Dahlhaus asserts:

That Wagner’s aesthetics proceeded not from the idea of the beautiful but from the idea of the sublime need not be demonstrated in painstaking detail. The mythological subject matter that he chose, like the symphonic style through which he sought to elicit empathic emotional understanding of the scenic action, was characterized by the representation of the sublime.\(^6^3\)

Wagner not only invokes the sublime by means of his music, which is yet another aspect of the Beethovenian tradition he inherited, but also represents the sublime in the extra-musical aspects of the works, mainly the plot and dramatic action taking place on stage. In creating works that combine multiple artistic mediums that are inherently linked in their composition with the goal of representing the sublime, Wagner effectively expands the subliminal experience, further overwhelming audiences in a new symphonic experience. Considering this evolved and innovative representation of the sublime, it comes as no surprise that listeners were willing to work for what promised to be an overwhelmingly fulfilling musical experience.

Looking back to Weingartner’s remarks, he implies a stark distinction between Brahms and Beethoven based on the narrative of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony. This is important, as there exists little scholarship exploring the ways in which Brahms departs from the Beethovenian tradition. Being that Brahms is often regarded as the composer who picked up where Beethoven

left off, with Brahms’s First Symphony deemed by many as “Beethoven’s Tenth”, it is only natural that Brahms would acquire this label as the continuation of Beethoven. Additionally, his allegiance to traditional forms and chamber music only further perpetuates this belief. However, Brahms’s choice to invert the symphonic narrative marks a striking difference in the expressive goals of the two composers. Where Beethoven understood the overtly external nature of the symphony, seeking to illustrate the more triumphant narratives of humanity, Brahms increasingly reinvents this archetype, turning inwards in search of vulnerability and heightened intimacy. Essentially, Brahms blurs the lines that place genres into specific categories, challenging the function of genre within a hierarchal-based society.

Brahms brings to the symphony the vulnerable and intimate experience associated with chamber music, striking many listeners as unusual and somewhat out of place. Dahlhaus expresses how “a Brahms symphony is virtually a musical attestation of the fact that each member of a crowd, though fully aware of the surrounding crowd, is nevertheless entirely on his own.”64 In blurring the lines that separate the experiences associated with chamber music and symphonies, Brahms expands the symphonic palate of expression, further paving the path for future symphonists in search of new means of expression.

64 Dahlhaus, 19th Century Music, 269.
Bibliography


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