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Sonata N. 2, Op. 100:
Romantic Expansion

Johannes Brahms' second sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major was written in 1886 in Thün, Switzerland, which at that time for Brahms provided him an inspiring place filled with prolific melodies. Composed as a 53 year-old, Brahms was in the later half of his life and at the peak of his musical maturity, working on other pieces at the time including his Cello Sonata N. 2 and Piano Sonata N. 3. As an admirer of Wagner, the sonata begins with a melody and harmony extremely similar to "Walther's Prize Song" from "The Meistersinger von Nuremberg" opera, which is how this sonata gets its nickname. Hermon Spies, the German Contralto, was among Brahms' visitors that summer and the fluidity of the melody can be observed from Wagner's influence among three other songs Brahms' composed with Mr. Spies in mind. However, despite the predictability that lyricism from songs can provide, Brahms and his developing ideas about form created a sonata that even though extremely languid, also deviated from the traditional sonata form. Based on the sonata da chiesa, a form in general originating from the Baroque era that usually included 4 movements following the slow-fast-slow-fast archetype, the sonata form contemporary listeners will recognize today includes the important sonata-allegro of the first movement of any traditional sonata, including two themes, transitions, a development and recapitulation. In his second violin sonata, Brahms does follow this first movement prototype on a basic formal level, but uses the melodies previously referred to as a continuous and lyrical way to extend phrases that would suite his romantic ideals about form at that time.

Traditionally a phrase is eight measures long and contains a first half and a second half, which depending on the ending of the first half confines the phrase into the definition of either a period or sentence. The two phrase types are, in the Classical and early Romantic eras, distinct

from one another but Brahms combines the two in his first theme. As a sentence, with the first half of the phrase separated equally with two similar or parallel lines, measures one through ten form a presentation, expanded at first with the first theme in the piano measuring eight bars rather than four by allowing the basic ideas, which normally are two bars long, to take up twice as much compositional space. Two bars are added to the opening of the sentence, one after the first half and then one after the second half, by the violin who seems to “answer” the piano’s statement which, interesting in its own right, are terms normally featured in more complex music, like the fugue. I believe that Brahms uses complex ideas traditionally found in music which only serious listeners would have appreciated to encourage those ideas to be more palatable for all music lovers by using melodic lines that, in their very nature of singing, contain an organic line and flow that is easy for all listeners to follow, and so can then be compositionally embellished by the more complex use of phrases within the form.

Brahms was of course a pianist and so a listener would expect to hear a little more interest in the piano part, but he goes one step further and makes the piano and violin equal. It isn’t until the violin comes in with the theme in measure twenty-one that audiences first hear how the roles between the violin and piano are uniquely represented in this sonata. The end of the later half of that sentence which we just discussed in the previous paragraph, from measures eleven through twenty-one, end in the dominate of the tonic key and do not form any resolution but rather lead to a repetition of the theme by the violin, which even still doesn’t truly resolve into a cadence until pickup into measure fifty-one. With all of this information buzzing around in our heads, the violin’s entrance confirms that the sentence from bars one through eleven was only the first half, or antecedent, of a larger period phrase whose consequent doesn’t end until measure thirty-one, even though it ends weakly. In conservatories and music schools around the world most instrumentalists are taught that traditionally the violin part is written to be more important than the piano and so should be played louder and with more confidence. However, due to the majority of Brahms’ experience in composing which he gained from working on his four symphonies for years and looking up to the compositional masters like Beethoven and Rimsky-Korsakov who specialized in orchestration, or the way virtuosic gestures and the specific instrument’s timbre were expertly weaved into the larger sound of a musical piece, Brahms is capable

of expanding the first and second themes in the opening movement of this sonata by treating the many musical lines in the piano as orchestral instruments that need to be developed in order to connect larger sections of form in such a way that requires a comparably short transition from the second theme into to the rest of the exposition.

With wisdom, Brahms manipulates the tension of listeners leading into the development so that specific musical elements can pop forth out of the emotional atmosphere he is trying to create. From measures thirty-one to the pickup into measure fifty-one, the transition is heightened with strong rhythms based in the downbeat of the meter. Now with the second theme in the dominate of our dominate, listeners mainly feel harmonically comfortably as if they were in home key, especially due to it's tranquil state labeled "tenderamente" and "molto dolce espressivo." Furthermore, the fact that the first and second themes, with their transitions after them, beginning in measures thirty-one and seventy-five respectively, add an evenness between the first and second halves of the first movement's exposition, which could only add to the comfort an audience would deduce from this movement's exposition. Comfort dissipates at this moment, as is tradition, during the development of the first movement in sonata-allegro form between measures eighty-nine and one hundred and fifty-eight, but the interesting thing about this sections tumultuous rhythm and evolving harmony is that, once again, the role of each instrument in producing an overall atmosphere is played equally by both the violin and piano, and although that balance is never relinquished the result is still the climatic moment of the sonata in measure one hundred and eighty until the end of the first theme in the recapitulation. At the first movement's climax, the pulse is stronger on the second half of the bar, which is equally divided between three eighth notes and a dotted quarter. This rhythm increasingly seems to one listening to both provide the strong forte on the downbeat and propel the music forward, even though the melody maintains its balance of distributing the rhythm equally in each bar. In his wisdom, Brahms seems to explore the concept that music and expression can have an exciting forward direction without giving up the stability that balance or equality can provide; a highly contrasting notion compared to the other late Romantic and early Modern composers at the time seem to convey, including Wagner, which begs the question: is Brahms making some sort of comment or remark about the other school of Romantic composers by using a melody by one of them in a

different and beautiful way? In addition to this thought, it is highly unique that the triplets which only show up during the fiery passages do not create a feeling of expansion as triplets normally do but rather add to the uneasy feeling these sections have in relation to the steady two pattern in the piano, and who's tension is not really resolved until a hemiola occurs in bar one hundred and three that leads to a passage of interruptions between the violin and piano before the final recapitulation.

The beauty of Brahms' wisdom in the first movement is that although tradition stipulates that musicians read exactly what's written on the page by the composer, and so for example play all fortes with the same importance, Brahms' orchestral experience allow us to interpret each dynamic and expressive marking differently pertaining to the range and texture of the musical context in that area. In no area in the first movement of this sonata can we better observe Brahms expressive painting with music than in the coda, which begins in measure two hundred and nineteen. As the first time performers and listeners hear a pianissimo in this movement, we instinctively know this moment is special, so when Brahms this time expands the music with an atmosphere rather than by the form based in rhythm we have been describing thus far it is not a shock but a feeling of release. If that weren't amazing enough for us analyzers, the piano afterwards is no longer a soft or "dolce" piano but rather an intense one which leads into a climatic section at pickup into measure two hundred and fifty-one, similar to that of one hundred and eighty expect this time the passage ends in a virtuosic moment back in the tonic that ends the first movement feeling satisfied after such a lengthy and tumultuous time.

After discussing the form extensively with both violin masters, Robert Davidovici and Pinchas Zuckerman, whom interestingly enough consciously share differing opinions, I can confidently tell you a secret about the sonata's second movement: it is both a slow second movement and quick third movement combined! In my opinion a perfect response to the first movement, the second takes the fiery dotted rhythms and accents on the downbeat to contrast further that dance like meter of 3 quarter notes per bar with the relaxing pianissimo atmosphere previously discovered in the first movement. Almost written in a theme and rondo form, the Adagio begins the movement, splits the movement in half, and ends the movement with a Vivace section in-between each area. Written in the key of F Major, the Adagio sections are written as piano "dolce

tranquillo” and brings back the perfect interval of the falling fourth, inverted from rising perfect fifth from the first movement’s relaxing coda, to create a soft and weeping-like gesture. Audiences may be used to the early romantic idea of changing the second movement of a sonata da chiesa from fast to slow, but Brahms’ collaboration of the two, similar to his collaboration of the piano and violin, produces a new emotional outcome of this middle movement. The Vivace, labeled “molto leggiero,” is in the style of a joke, with the importance on the second beat rather than on the first like the previous movement to give a lopsided feeling to the meter. This dotted gesture on the second beat of the Vivace sections is contrasted quickly in the Adagio sections with the slurred and weeping perfect fourth which, in its nature, organically has more emphasis on the beginning of the musical gesture rather than the end. With his play of gesture within rhythm and meter, Brahms creates a mood in the Adagio passages of stability and sadness which is suddenly contrasted by the lopsided and forward moving dance of the Vivace sections.

Like the first movement’s hemiola in the development, Brahms writes out a hemiola in the first Vivace section that within that moment causes the emphasis of the second beat to feel more stable. It’s not until measure sixty, twenty bars after the hemiola, that the staccato forte on the downbeat shifts the pulse and so allows the forward motion to rhythmically disintegrate in the final bars of the section and into the second Adagio which, for your knowledge, is now only marked piano and begins a little more strongly than it’s initial statement. This middle Adagio is expanded by a continuation of the section, starting in measure eighty, with a rising third. Both cause a listener to remember the atmosphere of the coda in the first movement as the music now hints at an expression of an emotion that is to come. It is interesting to note that in the middle Adagio of the second moment is the first time that we see “espressivo” and hear over the course of four measures the violin rising almost an octave to a climatic forte. By so doing the color changes here from a warm but plaintive soliloquy to a piercing and heartfelt cry, which is something audiences are sure to remember in the final Adagio. After the color change though, which wasn’t that shocking, listeners are most likely taken aback when they hear that the second Vivace is now quicker and includes forceful marcato plucking by the violinist, which almost seems demented and requires the final Adagio to make the audience feel at piece. As a result, the final Adagio, here marked Andante because of the preceding quacking of tempo in the previous Vi-

vace section, feels like a ascension into Heaven with the violin an octave higher than it ever has been before and, with sometimes six notes in the piano, the pianist providing a supportively warm texture. Brahms uses the combination of a slow and fast movement into one to not only contrasts emotions between the sections but, I believe, provide a private thought on the whole movement. The final Vivace, traditionally unexpected by listeners knowledgeable of form, seems to convey that all of the inmate moments the Adagio passages provided can be laughed at as if they were a joke or weren't supposed to be so tenderly expressed at all.

The final movement, entitled "Allegretto grazioso," caps off the whole sonata, especially with the joke-like quality of the end of the second movement, in a graceful and warm manner. Beginning with "dolce espressivo" the rising arpeggios in the violin is contradicted by the falling thirds and sixths in the piano, forming an expanding timbre between the two instruments, which then is further heightened by the violin starting on the first beat of the bar and the piano coming in on the second. A short call and response phrase, beginning with the piano in the pickup to measure sixteen, connects the theme with it's restatement which this time more notes in the piano help add an excitement to warmth created by the violin climbing the G string. Similar to the Rondo form of the second movement, the section between the only true theme in the third movement and it's repetition begins with the piano in measure thirty-one. An ascending pianissimo diminished chord creates a new atmosphere of mystery so that when the dynamics of piano and forte return within this section they are reinterpreted with intensity and almost a texture of "storm und drung" with low sixteenth notes in the piano and violin, similar in style to that of Beethoven. Expertly, Brahms releases this grumbling tension eight bars before the first return of the theme without forming another phrase so that by the second time we hear the theme in measure sixty-six it seems even more graceful, and almost even gracious. That short call and response transition from the theme to the mysterious section, from measures twelve to twenty-three, is returned to in measure seventy-four except this time Brahms has rewritten the section to develop into something we might traditionally consider to be a second or contrasting theme by taking a two beat descending arpeggio originally from the piano and placing it in the violin as fragments until in measure ninety when the violin begins a call and response passage with the piano and this time, unlike the in the first movement, the triplets help create a feeling of expan-

sion rather than forward motion. After the violin and piano switch the three against two tension in measure ninety-eight, previously seen in movement one, the two partnering instruments rhythmically disintegrate, again like movement 2, into an all together new section beginning in measure one hundred and two entitled “grazioso.”

By recalling compositional techniques previously used in the sonata, Brahms seamlessly connects the restatement of the theme and the second mysterious passage with new martial that he will end the sonata with. The final mysterious passage in the third movement has a late climatic moment in measure one hundred and thirty-two, something listeners have probably grown to be familiar with in hearing about this sonata, created by quick notes in both the violin and piano which, because the rhythm is written in long held half notes and triplets, leads to a small remembrance of the rising third and it’s associated feeling of spiritual ascension from the second movement and, because of this and without any other musical preparation, suddenly the theme of the third moment now written again as “espressivo dolce” feels like a final warm and tired embrace from the composer. In order to end the piece with a satisfying and victorious finish, Brahms takes the material from transitional section beginning in bar one hundred and twelve as a rhythmical template and inserts the only chords bowed by the violin in this sonata. The final bars thus become a coda-like finish whose character contains more wisdom and peace than any of the previous movements endings. Although very challenging to convey in performance, this sonata could be viewed almost like a biographical journey of Brahms himself. Having been trained in techniques of past composers, Brahms is obviously familiar and competent about the way forms and phrases were written by previous musician, however, by combining those ideas with clever ways of expanding them, Brahms takes his place amongst the new age of romantic composers in developing a way of adding meaning to his work. His second sonata for violin and piano is just an example but a solid and continuous one of how Brahms’ knowledge of past composers grew into an art form for expression most romantic artists were striving towards.