

Expression particulars of Brahms's music language, mirrored in his Compositions for Piano

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Abstract: *This article refers to the main features of expression in the music language in the piano compositions of Brahms. From the broad and long works for piano from his youth, the sonatas – true “disguised symphonies”, the music language of the composer evolves during his maturity towards the complexity of variations for piano and piano concertos – designed as genuine “symphonies with piano as an obligatory instrument”, so that, toward the end of his life, Brahms concentrate his full mastery into miniatures for piano, Opp. 116 – 119, true jewels, which represent the “swan song” of the German master. The expression particulars of his music language will be analysed through highlighting the sources and style types, style parameters and musical aesthetics elements that are specific of Brahms's work. The depth of Brahms's personality and experiences are mirrored through an elaborate musical discourse, where the Romanticist composer maintains the Classicist balance, logic and a rigorous control of the composition thinking, but the Classicist matrix is subjected to workthrough and an innovating spirit, under the star of aesthetical elegance. Novel is the fact that this apparent balance in the music of Brahms conceals strong inner tension. Thus, through a poetic language, the composer succeeds in expressing the deepest mysteries of the human soul, the finest vibrations, the most untranslatable impulses.*

Key-words: *Brahms, piano, expressiveness, style, aesthetics, poeticity*

1. Introduction

The music mirrors the composer's personality and experiences, and the central element, of major importance, is the evolution of the musical discourse. Albert Béguin remarked that Romanticism was the epoch of the great syntheses, with a taste for an original personality and unique spiritual adventures (Béguin 1970, 27). The defining criterion when choosing the motifs of a work becomes that of personal

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emotion, since Romanticism grants the miracle the right to exist, Romanticists attempt to bewitch the world again, a world desacralised by the Enlightenment and the dogmatic rationalism of the 18th Century (Râmbu 2001, 9).

Romanticism, seen as an apparently contradicting struggle between the aspiration of the future, and also the nostalgia of the glorious past, the crushing of conventions, but also the need for order, balance, the “apparent domination of feelings over reason” (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 125), the glorification of man and the pain over a lost God, leads to the rising of the Romanticist figure in Brahms’s works, with one foot in heaven and the other on earth, who is subjected to breaking or who appeals to profound reconciliation.

The individual choice, the Brahms sub-style within the Romanticist style, is to use the Classicist matrix, subjected to workthrough and to an innovative spirit.

The metaphor of identity in Brahms, illustrated particularly in the *Rhapsodies*, *Monologues* etc. brings to the foreground the *thanatic* feeling that reveals an extraordinary attitude identity, a temperamental, psychological, and affective imprint, the creator’s mark. The unique behaviour facing death has an impact in creating the testament protocol. The artist fights. He wants immortality, he wants the hero’s glory. He yearns for it at any price; at the price of physical death. It seems that the first *katharsis* of the Romanticist soul is mutiny, for he, the artist, is not understood. Hence the *Language of solitude* (Crişan 2016, 239). Prolonged unfulfilled expectations lead to the artist’s isolation, whose only pastime is to enjoy nostalgia and melancholy in all its depths. “The eminence of the spirit leads to unsociability”, Arthur Schopenhauer used to say.

2. Stylistic sources

The legacy of Beethoven, with the theme ideas, modulations, the noble and heroic tradition, the polyphonic technique, the monumental and solemn construction of the sound, all represent Brahms’s heritage. There is no doubt that the titan of Classicist music was he who dominated the work and influenced the personality of Brahms. The imprint of Beethoven, from “extasy to agony”, ends when the second symphony, the Brahms *Pastorale*, is written, when Brahms frees himself from the overwhelming pressure of the spirit of his great forerunner, moment noted in his letter to Hermann Levi: “You can’t imagine what it is like to incessantly hear the Titan’s steps behind you.”

In his turn, Brahms was an ethical and aesthetical model for Enescu, the “god of my youth adoration”, as Enescu himself said. He appreciated in Brahms above all

the Classicist form integrity, with the most accomplished freedom and mobility of expression, which characterises Brahms's thinking (Ștefănescu 1982, 348).

With a fantastic memory, almost never taking his scores with him on concert tours, Brahms was an autodidact as well, building up a solid education reading the Bible, Schiller, Goethe etc. With a cult for books, he created an impressive library over time, which he called *The jewelry box of the young Kreisler*. He loved to dig deeply into the entrails of books and suck the knowledge from the words, from beyond the words.

Brahms was a grave and profound man, with an ironically articulated retort. He stated about himself that within his being he never laughed. That is why he preferred the small close circle of friends instead of the stage, amidst whom he could play sunken within himself. The lone and quiet Brahms cannot be found either in the Beethoven-like mutiny accents, or in the strongly anguishing states of Chopin. His creation work does also not fall into the "playful" category of Mozart, but also not into the "effort" category of Beethoven.

Brahms maximally turns to account the hidden potential in each motif or theme. He succeeds in extracting all that is there in an embryo state and developing it later, through an amazing "effectiveness". It is certain that, in his works, Brahms gives us a lesson in the art of composing. It is as if he told us: *look, it was all there from the very beginning!* It is like a metaphor of life: these are the talents; multiply them and make them bear fruit! And the great composer more than succeeded in doing this.

3. Style

His mentor, Robert Schumann, a great visionary, pointed to the manner of approaching a work of art: pursuing the formal construction of style and language, identifying the poetic ideas and the informational spirit, as the style conditions and shapes the message through a particular form of language. Languages, encoded systems of communication, with symbolic and emotional values, serve the poeticity. The poetic language has ambiguity as its generating sub-layer – the starting point of any aesthetic experience.

3.1. The style as a deviation represents coming out of the stylistic norm, the divergence being one of the expressive manners, eloquent for Brahms's art. Sources of poeticity, the divergences bear the semantic load and grant refinement and complexity to the creation.

In Brahms's works we frequently hear the **deviation as non-grammaticality**, a divergence from the rule of the Classicist quadrature. E.g. in the *Rhapsody Op. 119 No. 4*, where we have a musical phrase of 5 bars, grouped 4+1 (Fig. 1), followed by the second couplet of the *Rhapsody*, where the phrases contain 8 bars, grouped 3+2+3 (Fig. 2), and also the **deviation as equivalence**, like in the case of repeating the section A in the *Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 6*.



Fig. 1. *Rhapsody, Op. 119 No. 4*

3.2. The music style as a choice is highlighted in Brahms by the expressive richness in composing, mostly due to his innovative spirit (melodic and architectural inventiveness of the last movement of the *Concerto No. 2 in B flat major, Op. 83*), sometimes due to an aesthetic elegance shown in the *Intermezzi*.

3.3. An eloquent example of **individual imprinting** is the rhapsodic genre, which, from Brahms's perspective, is in the ancient sense of the notion and of the epic poem. Of a "wild beauty", the Rhapsodies, with the pathos and vigour of their experiences, evoke the *Graces and the heroes* (Ștefănescu 1982, 239).

The condition of the hero in Brahms's works: the virile, imposing, handsome, solar, brave hero is taken by Brahms from the ideal mythological world of the Classicist hero to the fantasy world of his own universe, where he becomes nostalgic, fearful, lonely. The ancient hero steps into the Romantistic universe, where he is subjected to paradoxical experiences, feelings and states of mind.

4. Stylistic parameters

To be able to identify the expressiveness elements of Brahms's language, we will briefly enumerate the main parameters of stylistic analysis.

4.1. In Brahms, most often, the **melody** has no *initium*, like we can notice in the beginning of the *Rhapsody Op. 79 No. 2*.

4.1.1. Within the **tonality** mode changes occur, direct contrasts of the major-minor modes through placing the conflict at the centre of the musical ideas, which creates expressive ambiguity and uncertainty, e.g. in the coda of the central section of the *Rhapsody Op. 79 No. 1* (Fig. 2) or in the transition to the reprise of the first movement of the *Concerto No. 2 in B flat major, Op. 83* etc.



Fig. 2 *Rhapsody, Op. 79 No. 1*

Among the composing methods used by Brahms we find the reversal of the “usual” direction, from minor to major (Brahms chooses to close the *Rhapsody Op. 119 No. 4* in a dramatic and gloomy manner, in the minor homonymous key), sudden modulations to far-away tonalities, a weakening of the tonal syntax – weakening of the syntactic relations through choosing ambiguous ones, and this “reticence” in establishing the tonality in the first bars creates a state of *suspense*, of waiting for something (*Rhapsodies Op. 79, Intermezzo Op. 117 No. 2* etc.).

4.1.2. *The melodic profile* through novel melodic drawings grants a broad breath to Brahms's composition and generosity to the musical message. An example of a big arch per section is in the *Scherzo* in the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *Piano Sonata in f minor, Op. 5 – III. Scherzo*

In the *Intermezzo Op. 117 No. 3* a melodic drawing is noticed, that is arched both on the vertical axis and has flow-ebb movements on the horizontal axis.

4.1.3. Secondary parameters, their extension and the statistic climax

Charles Rosen said that in Romanticism the *spatiality, the colour of sound, the sound's intensity, the violence or delicacy of the gesture take over the role of intervallic heights, of rhythm* (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 140), a fact also remarked by Leonard Meyer, namely instituting the supremacy of secondary, statistic parameters, much more significant when expressing and accumulating states of tension. One may even talk of an “extension” of these secondary parameters through extending the duration of the pieces, an expanded and chromatised interval area, and through melodic expansion (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 155), ways to “broaden” the structures.

Localising the statistic climax usually occurs toward the end of the piece, as the finales of the extreme movements in the *Sonata in f minor*, the coda of the *Rhapsody Op. 119 No. 4*, the finale of the first movement in the *Concerto in B flat major, Op. 83* etc. But we also find exceptions where this can be identified at 2/3 from the piece's length, like in the *Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 6*.

4.1.4. In the Romanticism one notices a change in the function of **ornaments**. They are used much more rarely and become referential and characterial. In this sense, Brahms has eloquent examples in the *Rhapsody Op. 119 No. 4* (Fig. 4) or in the *Hungarian Dance No. 4*:



Fig. 4. *Rhapsody, Op. 119, No. 4*

If in Chopin the reflexiveness, melancholy are depicted through intense ornamentation, in Brahms the melodic lines are clear, without ornamentations, while the agglomeration occurs at the level of the polyphonic texture.

5.2. Rhythm and meter

In Brahms's works, bars change frequently, the rhythm is very varied, the rhythmic contrasts render better the aliveness and inner turmoil, as one notices in the second movement of the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5*. Likewise one distinguishes the

novel aspect of rhythmic ambiguities through binary writing in a tertiary meter, in bars 209-213 in the first movement of the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5* (Fig. 17) or in the *Waltz Op. 39 No. 6* (Fig. 5), changes within the meter etc.

The image shows a musical score for a waltz. It is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Vivace'. The dynamics are 'p' (piano) and the articulation is 'leggiero non legato'. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is numbered '6' on the left. A dashed line above the treble staff is labeled '8va', indicating an octave transposition. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand.

Fig. 5. *Waltz, Op. 39, No. 6*

There are 3 types of time organisation of the musical events, identified by Ștefan Niculescu – rarefactions, intermediate states, and agglomerations (Coroiu 2018, 114) – the events gain distance, create “spaces” or show collective features. Thus, one of the ways to escape temporality are the equal pulsations, which create suspended time, getting out of the temporality like in the *Romance Op. 118 No. 5*. If in Chopin the vision is predominantly that of a solo pianist, through a discursive language, as these agglomerations occur on the horizontal, in Brahms, with his orchestral vision, the harmonic agglomerations are on a vertical axis, having a polyphonic function.

5.3. Harmonics, polyphony

Harmonics leaves the presence of the three tonal functions in favour of the secondary ones, which leads to diminishing the tonal stability and to frequent chords on secondary degrees. The form of a sonata gains other proportions and conflicts through a diversification of its harmonies and modulations, and through intense chromatisation. The subdominant function in tonal harmonics is found in the plagal cadenzas, both in the closing chords of the *Scherzo* and in the finale of the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5*. No new harmonies are invented; the stress falls on using new harmonic sequences through leaving out chords or combining elements from two or more different chords, like in the *Intermezzo Op. 119 No. 1*.



Fig. 6. *Intermezzo Op. 119 No. 1*

Brahms's piano works as a mature composer are characterised especially through harmonic ambiguity, which we find along the whole *Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 6*, chromatic harmonics, with plenty of examples in the *Intermezzo Op. 117 No. 2*.

5.4. Form

The broadening of the theme sphere is noticed, with a vibrant inner flow, various proportions, and frequent asymmetries. New music forms emerge: the ballad, rhapsody, lied, impromptu, elegy, nocturne, barcarole, overture. As for the theme, the antithesis of the themes stands out (in the piano sonatas, in the first piano concerto, in the *miniatures for piano Op. 118 No. 3*, *Op. 119 No. 4*, and others), as well as the thematic metamorphosis (in the *Rhapsodies Op. 79*), the concatenation of themes, their transfiguration, that of the motifs, and their novel articulation.

5.4.1. Music genres and forms: the miniature and the lied

Miniatures are the “sketch of an expressive universe through a concise musical gesture” (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 129). Compared to the simple three-movement structure of Chopin's miniatures, in Brahms, miniatures gain a complex structure, with forms within the form (*Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 2*). The *Opp. 116, 117, 118* and *119* are Brahms's spiritual testament, his “monologues for piano”, as Hanslick called them. They are small-sized pieces that continue the concept of *Opp. 76* and *79*, written 12 years earlier, and that add the synthesis of the characteristic features of the style in his last years of creation. In an inward tone with a reflexive tendency, his works are of intense lyricism and of deep meditative profoundness, most of them being *intermezzi*, three caprices, one ballad, one romance, and one rhapsody, remarkable through the noble accomplishment of their feelings.

Unlike the aesthetic motif of the Romantist fragment, in Brahms each miniature (*intermezzo*, ballad, romance, caprice) is independent, they can be performed individually, following their own algorithms, in a different sequence

than how they were published, as their collection into cycles was a strictly editorial action of Fritz Simrock. Proof of this is the performing approach in a totally different order, in both recordings and concerts, of the pianists Glenn Gould and Murray Perahia.

The lied is another miniature genre, where the concept of syncretism of the arts is best shown, being the perfect fusion between music and poetry. Thus, the poetics is a basic feature of the lied, and the Romanticist lyricism another of its defining coordinates. Brahms proposes to us a true orchestral lied in the third movement of the *Concerto No. 2 for piano*, with echoes in the slow movement of the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5*.

Emil Cioran was of the opinion that *converting the musical into the plastic is, in other words, converting the infinite into a form* (Cioran 2016, 15). Emblematic for the synaesthetic aspects and eloquent in this sense is the second movement of the sonata mentioned above, *Andante espressivo*, that confession, passionate unveiling, which knows no limitations, actually a singular hypostasis in Brahms's work. In the first section (a flat major), a descriptive episode, the still and charm of the night, the idyllic atmosphere take our thoughts to Eminescu's verses:

*"The blue lake in the woods / Is full with yellow water lilies;
It is shivering in white ripples / And is shaking a boat"*

And the mystery of the two lovers whispering in section two of the same movement – *Poco più lento* (D flat major) – could not have been rendered with more sensitivity than through the verses of the Evening Star of Romanian poetry:

*"And I spite this blasted time, / How it still dares to pass
While I whisper with my beloved / Hand in hand, mouth to mouth. "*

5.4.2. *The nature motif*

Nature, in Brahms's vision, is the one calling forth memories (the wind, the mountains), the framework landscape of love and death, from the Northern mists in folk ballads to pastoral, idyllic, bright landscapes. Cioran noted: "Who does not love nature does also not love music, and those landscapes that do not evoke musical representations in us cannot be memories." Can there be "solemn sunsets without Brahms?" (Cioran 2016, 108) In the miniatural landscape, where low-pitch, tenebrous tones are predominant, *Romance Op. 118 No. 5* is a singular case in Brahms's creation for piano solo. Inspired from the South Italian landscape, it stands out through a brightness that contrasts the other miniatures, "filled with melancholy or driven through epic pathos" (Ștefănescu 1982, 319).

The folklore motif. Brahms was especially attracted by the sonority of the Hungarian folklore, “hence the insinuating charm of his work” (Cioran 2016, 50). If in the *Hungarian dances* themes from the Hungarian folklore are actually processed, in certain *Waltzes*, *Op. 39* or in the second couplet of the last movement from the *Concerto No. 2 for piano*, *Op. 83*, one finds Hungarian elements, accents, inflections organically incorporated in the work’s structure. Excessively marked by the specific sadness of Hungarian music, Brahms, the melancholy supplier for Cioran, “has less pride in his sadness and thus piously abandons himself to dreaming” (Cioran 2016, 87).

5.5. Orchestration

The symphonic vision goes through all of Brahms’s piano works. From the piano sonatas, true “disguised symphonies”, as Robert Schumann called them, the last one structured into five movements, to piano concertos, written as symphonies with piano as an obligatory instrument, where the instruments of the orchestra play episodic solo parts. The *Concerto No. 2* is structured in 4 movements, the middle movements *Scherzo* and *Andante* having the specific symphonic contrast. Brahms maintains the subordination principle of the concerto style, and stressing the solo instrument, namely the piano in this case, is done to the extent it is needed to communicate the content. The organic incorporation of the solo instrument into the symphonic vision of the whole is noted, which requires that the solo pianist have chamber music skills and attributes, and a conducting vision and approach. Last, but not least, the *miniatures* are written as incapsulated symphonies, seeds of potential symphonic parts (e.g. *Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 6*, *Rhapsody Op. 119 No. 4*).

5.6. Dynamics and agogic

The language of Brahms is highlighted through a great variety of colours, through developing and differentiating the dynamics and agogical elements, which render the nuance differences, clashing contrasts, changes in the tempo. Unlike other composers who indicate clear agogical instructions, Brahms does it by writing. Thus, the *accelerando* through rhythmic augmentation and the *ritenuto* through diminution are present in the coda to the first part of the *Sonata in f minor*, *Op. 5*. Another example of *ritenuto* is noted in the finale of *Rhapsody Op. 79 No. 2*.

6. Aesthetic categories in Brahms's work

Regarding the aesthetic categories, the work of Brahms is mainly found in the following spectrums: the **elegy** (*Intermezzo Op. 119 No. 1*), the **funereal** (*Rhapsody Op. 79 No. 2*, the *Intermezzo* of the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5* or the *Scherzo* of the same piece), the **epic** (the *Rondo* of the *Concerto No. 1 for piano, Op. 15*, the *Rhapsodies Op. 79*, the *Ballad Op. 118 No. 3*, the *Rhapsody Op. 119 No. 4*, the middle episode from the *Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 6*, and others), the **solemn** (the third couplet in the *Rondo* of the *Sonata in f minor, Op. 5*). The category that best characterises the whole of Brahms's work is, however, the **chiselling**, which works over the means of expression with a jeweller's accuracy, deeply investigating them, polishing them and rendering them "volume", through an elevated presentation of the sonorous material.

7. Conclusions

The artistic language needs to be validated by a cultural context. On the other hand, the Romanticism proposes in the foreground, however, the condition and creative power of the genius. Leonard B. Meyer, through his concept of *acontextualism* (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 151), brings the genius to the aesthetic domain, for which the context would be irrelevant. The genius is equivalent with innovation, originality, change, which Brahms was excellent at. The creator accessed the laws of the imaginary and generates a second world of the opus, with symbolic value, far from the models of reality and tending toward an ideal of perfection. He can destroy any norm, as the *katharsis* effect does not appear by rendering the reality as it is, but by transfiguring the reality in which the receiver is heightened spiritually.

Wave-people, stuck, captive in this bit of time and space, have stopped hearing the song of the world and have long forgotten to learn it. They do not become melodic existences anymore, notes of the great universal symphony. Brahms helps us reach the state of grace, helps us remember. And for this we can only be grateful to him. Through an exercise of imagination we may consider that Brahms has picked the fruit of his creation and, through long and inspired processes of alchemical distillations and sublimations, he closed these "enchanted seeds" in alembics, decyphered only by those who know or intuit Brahms's poetic cypher.

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