

THE FIRST PIANO CONCERTO OF JOHANNES BRAHMS:
ITS HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Brahms's music has begun to occupy a larger role in the consciousness of musicologists, and with this surge of interest came a refreshingly original approach to his music. Although the First Piano Concerto op. 15 of Johannes Brahms is a beloved part of the standard piano repertoire, there is a curious underrepresentation of the work through the lens of historical performance practice.

This monograph addresses the various aspects that comprise a thorough performance practice analysis of the concerto. These include pedaling, articulation, phrasing, and questions of tempo, an element that takes on greater importance beyond just complicating matters technically. These elements are then put into the context of Brahms's own pianism, conducting, teaching, and musicological endeavors based on first and second-hand accounts of the composer's work. It is the combining of these concepts that serves to illuminate the concerto in a far more detailed fashion, and ultimately enabling us to re-evaluate whether the time honored modern interpretations of the work fall within the boundaries that Brahms himself would have considered effective and accurate.

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CHAPTER 1

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND THE FIRST PIANO CONCERTO

Though there is a great deal written on the subject of performance practice in Brahms's music, one work that is under-represented is the concerto for Piano and Orchestra in D minor, op. 15.¹ It is an early work, completed in his twenties, that ultimately forced Brahms to come to terms with his orchestrational language as well as large forms. The work itself presents several challenges to the performer. By the standards of the concerti that had been written to that point, the concerto was ahead of its time as it introduced a textural thickness in the keyboard writing and an expansiveness of structure that was largely unseen until Russian composers started writing their own virtuoso works roughly ten to twenty years later. For this reason, its chronology in the composer's catalogue, and because it is too often overlooked in favor of the more mature second concerto, the concerto is fertile ground for a fresh look at performance practice in the music of Johannes Brahms.

Because the concerto was completed in early 1858, when Brahms was only twenty-four, we find a work of a composer still struggling to find a compositional voice. It is a fascinating case study to consider this concerto against the rest of his output. While attention has been paid to other significant works of his with regard to performance practice, this concerto signifies major shifts in Brahms's musical language, and thus must

¹ Throughout the remainder of the text, the work will be referred to simply as "the concerto."

also be considered vital to an understanding of performance practice traditions. It is not enough, however, to consider only traditions without providing any sort of blueprint for the accurate execution of this music in the twenty-first century. The challenge of writing on this concerto from a performance practice standpoint does not occur in the interpretation and repetition of well-documented traditions and methods, but rather manifests itself in the task of taking what is known, considering and re-considering it in light of the latest research and formulating a set of practices for this piece that stand up well in a modern context.

There is an inherent risk, when broaching the topic of performance practice from a general sense, of losing sight of the fact that the field of study, though seemingly a definitive practice, is in actuality a moving target. As Michael Musgrave writes in his book *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style*, what evidence we have regarding performance practice in the 18th and 19th centuries “does not come in a balanced form. In the age before performance became a natural subject for detailed analysis or comparison, it was a matter of chance and circumstances which performances were closely described or which topics revealingly discussed” (Musgrave 2003, xvii). The research specifically on Brahms is unfinished at best. While this presents certain challenges to performers and musicologists, it also presents an opportunity to view the information available, not as the final word on the subject, but as a tool for making one’s own determinations.

The topic of performance practice, by its very nature, presents the dilemma of constantly needing to reconcile dichotomous concepts. It is possibly the overarching theme of any performance practice study. With so much new information on the subject

making its way into the forefront of our collective musical consciousness, we are forced to critically consider and assess the fundamental intentions of a composer's markings. The stylistic sturdiness of historical practices must be reconciled within a modern day context. Are we taking into account the instruments being used, the concert halls being written for, and the potential for vastly different technical approaches? Also, where are there gaps in our knowledge? In the case of Brahms, there appears to be a significant amount of ambiguity as to what degree his markings can be taken literally. Bernard Sherman writes that musicianship "consists of a set of habits. Brahms's comments about performance may confuse us because they take for granted habits that have now disappeared" (Musgrave 2003, 3). This quote poses the valid point that what we discover about performance practice must be contextualized constantly. These practices did not exist in a vacuum then and cannot exist in a vacuum now. When we read of Brahms's own performances, it is important to understand that what he prescribed for his own performances assumes the traditions of the time and takes into account foregone ideas that have since ceased to be a part of the musical lexicon.² Jon W. Finson furthers this notion:

The value of performing older music lies in the effort to reconstitute the sound of the period, just as the value of history lies in trying to understand the events of a particular time. An informed approximation of historical performing practice is always better than reducing music from all periods to a standard style and instrumentation. (Finson 1984, 460)

² One could equate the concept of interpreting bygone musical habits to interpreting Shakespearean English, which at first pass seems odd and unnatural.

Chief among the elements that render the art of classical music-making unique is the type of interpretation required to produce an effective rendering of a work. Traditional classical music differs from almost any other genre of music because of the importance it places on structure and interpreting notation. The second bit of reconciling pertaining to performance practice must address the difference between interpretation and invention. Where is the line of demarcation between the two? Again, answering this question involves taking the practices of the time period into account. A harpsichordist or singer skillfully improvising ornaments in a repeat section of a Handel suite or da capo aria will be hailed for his or her stellar musicianship. The same goes for an instrumentalist improvising or even writing their own cadenzas for a Mozart concerto. Conversely, a violinist replacing a cadenza in the Sibelius concerto or pianist doing the like in the third Rachmaninoff Concerto might well be thought of as overstepping the boundaries of creative license. Classical music requires a performer to operate within narrow confines and still produce a result that is spontaneous and interesting to the listener.

Further complicating the issue is the need to decipher a composer's personal terminology. Expressive devices and their meaning, especially, are an inexact science, because each composer applies them in a way that is personal and unique to them. In the music of Brahms, this is all the more important. Sherman writes,

We can question, for example, how exact and fixed the performance details were in Brahms's own conception of a work. Brahms particularly praised the conductor Fritz Steinbach in the Fourth Symphony; but Robert Pascall and Philip Weller point out in their chapter on tempo flexibility in Brahms's orchestral music that Steinbach's interpretation of the Fourth seems to have contradicted instructions Brahms gave to Joachim for interpreting this work. Walter Frisch emphasizes that Brahms appreciated interpreters of widely

varied sorts, including some generally regarded by the standards of the day as free and others thought of as strict. . . It may be that Brahms, like many composers, was concerned more with a performer's ability to convey musical content than with adherence to specific performance practices. (Musgrave 2003, 2-3)

What Sherman writes introduces the possibility that Brahms appreciated an interpretation/interpreter who presented his works in an emotionally and musically convincing way. For this reason, any discussion of Brahms performance practice needs to establish which details in Brahms's music are to be treated as gospel and which are merely the composer's suggestions in an attempt to arrive at a certain musical result. We know from various accounts of the people closest to him that Brahms was a walking contradiction (chief among those contradictions being his keen knowledge of the bible despite his fervent agnosticism), and because of this, it is vital for performers to ascertain which elements leave absolutely no room for negotiation (Swafford 1997, 28).

When viewed in the context of Brahms's life, the concerto presents a set of philosophical conflicts. Considering the time period during which it was written, that it is a work fraught with tumult is not surprising. Those years were filled with a great deal of emotional upheaval and confusion for the young composer. Brahms was starting to develop strong romantic feelings for Clara, the wife of his mentor and good friend Robert Schumann. On June 19, 1854, Brahms admitted to Joachim his love for Clara:

I believe I admire and honour her no more highly than I love and am in love with her. I often have to restrain myself forcibly just from quietly embracing her and even—: I don't know, it seems to me so natural, as though she could not take it at all amiss. I think I can't love a young girl at all any more, at least I have entirely forgotten them; after all, they merely promise the Heaven which Clara shows us unlocked. (Avins 1997, 47-48)

Compounding the unfortunate timing of this newfound forbidden love was the deteriorating physical and mental health of her husband, Robert. In February of 1854, Schumann attempted suicide by casting himself into the Rhine river (Swafford 1997, 108). Despite his failure, Schumann never fully recovered from the hallucinations that compelled the attempt, and despite fleeting moments of clarity, his illness continued to progress until in April of 1856, “doctors pronounced him incurable” (Swafford 1997, 157). And so, while composing his concerto, the twenty-year-old Brahms was forced to balance his romantic feelings for Clara with the need to console her during the prolonged death of her husband. As a result, the work becomes an in-depth look at a young Brahms confronting the immediate need for creative and personal maturation. The D minor piano Concerto can be viewed as Brahms’s coming of age.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY, LITERATURE AND SOURCES

Since the concerto occupies an important place in the standard concerto repertoire and represents a turning point in Brahms's life, one struggles to understand why, from a scholarship aspect, it is neglected in comparison to his other works. Writing that solely addresses the concerto is quite limited, and as the piece is only marginally addressed in discussions of performance practice in Brahms's music. The Second Piano Concerto, a work that is undoubtedly more sophisticated from a compositional standpoint, garners considerably more attention. A large portion of the writing on the concerto is anecdotal and does not go into any significant depth on the matter of performance practice.

Despite the lack of attention paid to historical practices in the concerto, the genesis of the work is well researched and highlights its incredible importance by placing it into the proper chronological context of Brahms's works. Written initially as a sonata for two pianos in June 1854, Brahms found the result ineffective and longed for the work to be considerably weightier (Steinberg 1998, 108). Though Brahms initially struggled to find the proper instrumentation to give the concerto the gravitas he desired, as evidenced by the work's stints as the aforementioned sonata and then as a symphony by July 1854, the struggles finally yielded a piece that was more grandiose in structure and more symphonic in nature.

For Brahms, the concerto was the first foray into both large structures and orchestral writing. Despite Robert Schumann's declaration in his 1853 *Neue Bahen* article that Brahms's music was inherently orchestral and Clara Schumann's journal entry from the same time period in which she unequivocally stated that the orchestra was the

medium which would best serve his music, Brahms could not yet bring himself in earnest to compose a symphony (Swafford 1997, 77-79). The experiment of turning the sonata into a symphony, as it turned out, was an ill-advised choice on the composer's part because "The symphony resisted pulling together, demanding a maturity with the orchestra and with large forms that he did not yet possess" (Swafford 1997, 120). Nonetheless, numerous readings of the sonata with Clara were enough to convince him that two pianos did not provide the size and variety of sound he sought. It was with this in mind that he struck a balance by turning the sonata/symphony into a concerto for piano and orchestra.

The decision to rework the piece from a symphony to a concerto came with its own set of problems, and Brahms was forced to omit three of the four movements he had composed (Botstein 1999, 47). Only the first movement remained, and Brahms set to work writing a suitable adagio and finale for the concerto.³ The composition of those two movements, especially the finale, proved problematic. Numerous correspondences between Brahms and Joseph Joachim detail the frustration and desperation that the young composer was feeling. In a letter dated December 11, 1856, Brahms wrote to Joachim,

Dear Joseph,
What must you be thinking of me for not writing at all?⁴ Perhaps simply the truth. You gave me something to think about, and I could never come to

³ As Leon Botstein notes in *The Complete Brahms*, the second movement that Brahms omitted was a slow scherzo that later reappeared as the funeral march in *Ein deutsches Requiem* (47).

⁴ As Styra Avins explains in *Johannes Brahms: Life and letters*, "Brahms continued to wrestle with his concerto. He let Joachim know that in Hamburg he was having difficulty finding the necessary peace and quiet, but then neglected to answer his friend's letters" (148).

terms with it. . . So I'm sending you the Finale to be rid of it at last. Will it satisfy you? I doubt that very much. The ending was actually becoming good, but now it doesn't seem so to me. . . (Avins 1997, 148)

Eventually, at the pleading of Joachim ("But I beg you man, please, for God's sake let the copyist get at the concerto" [Steinberg 1998, 110]), and after more revisions to the first movement, Brahms consented to a reading of the work in April 1857, and according to Michael Steinberg, "bit by bit, Brahms came to face the inevitable—that he must let the work go and perform it" (Steinberg 1998, 110).

An understanding of performance practice traditions is necessary to inform the rest of Brahms's music. His next significant work with orchestra after the concerto came roughly ten years later in 1868, when he completed *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, followed by the first symphony in 1876.⁵ The lack of attention paid to the concerto has left a large void when it comes to Brahms and orchestral music, and as a result, mistakenly cast doubt on the period of time between the concerto and symphony as relevant to his subsequent works from a performance practice perspective. The concerto and C minor Symphony have one major philosophical difference. In the piano concerto, Brahms makes clever use of Beethoven's forms, copying the structure of his rondo from the third

⁵ Considering that Brahms started sketches for it around the time that he converted the concerto from a symphony to a concerto, the first symphony could be considered somewhat of a spiritual successor to the concerto. It is also entirely possible that Brahms's decision to turn the two piano sonata into a symphony was as much a musical reaction to Schumann's suicide attempt as it was a quest for the ideal spectrum of sound. The Schumanns, after all, had been trying for some time to convince Brahms to write a symphony and this brief attempt could be viewed as an attempt to placate those requests, whereas the first symphony might very well have been Brahms's way of paying homage to Schumann by bringing the idea of a symphony to fruition.

piano concerto almost literally. Finding the concerto torturously difficult to write, Brahms channeled his spiritual predecessor for inspiration. Michael Steinberg writes,

Beethoven is all over Brahms's First Piano Concerto, the score into which Brahms channeled the energies he had hoped to devote to his first essay in symphony: the choice of the Ninth Symphony key of D minor, the rhetorical stance, the wild *Hammerklavier* Sonata trills, the modeling (as Donald Tovey points out) of the finale on the one in the C-minor Piano Concerto. (70)⁶

The C minor symphony, on the other hand, reveals a composer for whom the nearly twenty year struggle to write a symphony in the shadow of his musical idol became a kind of catharsis. In the concerto, Brahms ultimately came close to approaching the intensity of his idol and according to Jan Swafford, may have even surpassed it. Swafford references the first movement and its violent opening in his explanation:

The effect of this opening may be the most turbulent in the repertoire to that time – not the gleeful demonism of Liszt and early Brahms, or the dramatic flash of dissonance that opens the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth, but something darker and more savage. The opening and the ensuing first movement, one of the longest of all concerto movements, are as dramatic as Beethoven's Ninth and on a comparable scale of weight and time... There is a sensation of immediacy, of *realism*, in this music that Brahms never attempted again. The explanation for it appears to be that in his mind the beginning of the concerto evoked the tragedy that preceded its inspiration by a few days: Robert Schumann's leap into the Rhine. . . In that connection we also find, perhaps, one of the reasons Brahms could not let go of this movement: its turmoil was too compelling to him, too close not only to Schumann's fall but to his own chaotic feelings in the aftermath. . . There was perhaps another reason: Brahms pounded at the intractable mass [the

⁶ The time frame during which Brahms composed the concerto was an extremely productive for him. In addition to writing the concerto and beginning sketches for the first symphony, he also composed the first version of the C minor Piano Quartet Op.60 (1968) which first appeared a half-step higher in C-sharp minor. Steinberg also believes that the composition and subsequent revision of this quartet, both of which occurred before he made the final push to finish the first symphony, was the final hurdle he needed to overcome before assuming his status of Beethoven's spiritual successor (70).

first movement as referenced by Hans Gal] out of loyalty and obligation, because this was the symphonic music that Robert and Clara Schumann had demanded of him. (Swafford 1997, 170)

Literature Review

The majority of writing on the topic of performance practice in Brahms has been dedicated to two groups of works: the late piano pieces (Opp. 116-119) and the chamber works. It is not a mystery why these works are chosen more often than others, as they represent Brahms both at his most personal and introspective, and also in his most mature state as a composer. There is much to be gained from considering the writing on those two groups of pieces, as they provide ample opportunity for the analysis of articulation, pedaling, and flexibility in the piano works and bowing, phrasing, and articulation in the string writing. Of these editions, one that deserves special mention is “Performance Practices in Johannes Brahms’s Chamber Music,” an appendix to Bärenreiter’s recently published volumes of Brahms’s chamber music. Though pertaining to the chamber works and giving scant mention to the concerto, Clive Brown, Neal Peres Da Costa, and Kate Bennett Wadsworth touch on topics such as use of the damper and *una corda* pedals, tempo and rubato, bowings in string writing, and articulation vs. phrasing.

Reuben Phillips’s article, “Performing Brahms in the 21st Century,” provides a wonderfully concise overview of how historical tradition and modern constructs can be reconciled to provide the most fulfilling readings of Brahms’s music. Among Sherman’s studies of tempo and meter in Brahms’s music, “Tempos and Proportions in Brahms: Period Evidence” is a fascinating look at the meaning of the existing metronome markings. In this article, the concerto is featured as one of only eight works that have

been published with any sort of metronome indications, and the validity of those markings is thoroughly scrutinized. There are also several scholarly sources that take a unique approach to performance practice in Brahms. Camilla Cai examines Brahms's piano writing through the lens of his preference of certain pianos, a perspective which proves quite relevant when considering the potential balance issues in a work with an orchestral assembly such as in the concerto. Another approach is taken by Ann Riesbeck DiClemente in her 2009 dissertation entitled, "Brahms Performance Practice in a New Context" the author uses Bruce Hungerford's audio recordings of lessons with Brahms's former student and protégé Carl Friedberg.

One of the most crucial sources of material on this topic is the body of existing correspondence from and to Brahms. These letters give a far more incisive account of the personal and creative struggles Brahms was encountering while writing the concerto. The abundance of letters pertaining specifically to the work are an invaluable resource, as Brahms sent all the revisions of the concerto to Joachim for his review. As a result, we are able to peer in on structural alterations that were made to the work, questions regarding orchestration, and the numerous difficulties Brahms encountered. In addition, we are also exposed to a more youthful and narcissistic version of the composer, who desperately a place among the Austro-German cultural elite. The most useful sources for transcripts and translations of these letters are George Henschel's *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms* (2001) and Styra Avins's *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (1997). The latter is especially important as it is the most comprehensive compendium of Brahms's letters to date. In addition to Brahms's own correspondences, Nora Bickley's

Letters From and To Joseph Joachim (2011) provides a fascinating glimpse into the perception of Brahms by his closest peers.

Michael Musgrave has furthered the cause of Brahms performance practice study greatly with his numerous publications that touch on a wide variety of topics within the field. His two volumes, entitled *Brahms* and *Brahms 2: Biographical, Documentary, and Analytical Studies* (1983, 1987) are filled with anecdotal and analytical studies of Brahms's music. In addition, Musgrave and Sherman are responsible for an all-encompassing book dedicated solely to unpacking various problems that had arisen in Brahms performance practice, *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style* (2003), consisting of seven detailed essays on topics pertaining to historical performance practice in Brahms's music. The first, written by Sherman, explores Brahms's own style and preference for the performance of his works. Sherman takes a decidedly less conventional stance and makes a case for Brahms not subscribing to one school of thought or method of playing, but rather leaving himself open to discovering new perspectives on his music from the vantage point of colleagues and performers he respected and trusted greatly. The second essay, written by Styra Avins, uses the content of Brahms's letters to piece together a cohesive narrative that makes a compelling argument for a certain type of performance in Brahms.⁸ Other essays address tempo markings, string playing, and performance practice in other works of Brahms.

⁸ One of the highlights of her essay is a thorough discussion and analysis of Brahms's preference of pianos and his predilection for oversized orchestral forces. This part of the essay shines a light on the possible acoustic palette that he had in mind when he was writing. Conversely, Avins presents scenarios in which Brahms was known to prefer smaller groups in certain circumstances, furthering the notion that there was an ever-

Sources that deal with more general aspects of Brahms's music include Michael Steinberg's two volumes of program notes, *The Concerto* (1998) and *The Symphony* (1995) that highlight the composition and performance of the concerto and provide a brief analysis of the work. Other sources along these lines include Walter Frisch's compilation of essays, *Brahms and His World* (2009), Leon Botstein's survey of Brahms's compositions, *The Complete Brahms* (1999), and Jan Swafford's definitive biography, *Johannes Brahms* (1997).

Survey Of Editions

A survey of the various editions of the concerto is crucial to understanding performance practice within the context of the published evolution of the work. The concerto poses unique challenges for an editor. Paul Badura-Skoda writes in the preface of his 1963 edition of the work:

The revision of this concerto presents a difficult task, as the printed score, not being considered the final form, differs from most of Brahms's other works. That print (1873) contains several engraving faults, also slipshod and inconsistent writing which makes it appear as though Brahms had not gone through it with his otherwise customary care. Mainly in the solo part this print varies between the MS, and the first print of the solo part, or it runs on independently of both without showing a precise will. The reason may be found in the long interval between the composition and the print, perhaps also in the fact that although we now consider this work as one of his greatest creations, he had lost interest in it owing to the enduring lack of appreciation both by the press and the public. Thus, the printed score not being reliable, the earlier versions have to be consulted for establishing a correct text. (Eulenburg iii, 1963)

present plurality in what the composer found to be effective ways of accomplishing certain musical results.

Furthermore, in the 2010 addendum to his latest revision of the concerto, Badura Skoda's wording adequately summarizes the difficulties of editing the work: "the present edition can claim to represent Brahms's definitive intentions as far as they are ascertainable" (Edition Peters 1).

Because the initial two-piano sonata and symphonic variants are lost, the discussion of editions must begin with the composer's autograph. The autograph displays certain quirks and markings that do not appear in any other published edition.⁹ In his article analyzing the John Ogden/Leopold Stokowski recording of the piece, Ian Pong summarizes these markings, some of which are rather noteworthy. He writes,

There are many very interesting features that can only be revealed by the manuscript. For instance, the way the piano part was written suggested that the staves did not reflect whether the notes should be played by the left hand or the right. There are also places that are different from popular printed version of the piece. One most intriguing observation is the beginning of the second movement, where between the two full-rested piano staves lies a line of writing taken from the Eucharistic Sanctus, *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*, with hyphens between some of the syllables such that the words and the phrasing of the strings agree. At the recapitulation, however, the words do not reappear, nor is the instrumental phrasing the same. It has been suggested that the movement may have been intended for a requiem, or related to Schumann's death, but there is insufficient evidence linking them together.¹⁰ (Pong 2011)

⁹ The metronome markings, in particular, are worthy of universal mention and analysis. It isn't necessarily that they should be considered the definitive tempi indications, as Brahms's preference later evolved to a somewhat quicker pulse.

¹⁰ Johannes Gerdes writes that a letter from Brahms to Clara Schumann promising the second movement of the concerto to be a portrait of her "makes it clear that this sentence does not as much testify to a relationship to the text of the Roman Mass, as that it indicates that Brahms wrote the *Adagio* as a special tribute to the married couple Schumann, close friends. He had often called his friend, who had died in July of the same year under such tragic circumstances, 'Mynheer domine'." (Gerdes 1983, 2)

The hypothesis that Pong mentions cannot be discounted as they touch on two tidbits we know to be true. The mention of the second movement being initially intended for a requiem is interesting in light of what we know about the utilization of Brahms's first pass at a second movement as the funeral march in *Ein Deutsche Requiem*, op. 45. Furthermore, the texture of the piano writing in the opening section of the concerto and its brief recapitulation decidedly resembles the choral counterpoint we see in the opening movement of op. 45. What proves even more interesting however, is a side by side comparison of the writing in the second movement of the concerto and a reduction of the opening choral writing in Brahms's *Nänie*, op. 82. What we see is Brahms relying on similar voice-leading and textures (though not by way of fugal entry in the concerto). While there is no historical correlation between *Nänie* and the concerto, the chorale style of writing in the piano entrance of the second movement of the concerto is a distinct quality that suggests the programmatic intent of the second movement.

The first edition, published in 1861 by J. Rieter-Biedermann, contains a curious deviation from the printed text of most modern editions.¹¹ In measures 278 and 281, instead of the customary tying of the sixth beats across the bar-line, there is an octave leap.¹² Examples 1 and 2 demonstrate the difference.

¹¹ Though Edition Peters and Eulenburg do suggest the possibility of this change, the Rieter-Biedermann is the only edition where it appears in the actual body of the musical text.

¹² Interestingly enough, the two piano reduction done by Brahms himself and that was published by Rieter-Biedermann, features the more conventional of the two variants and does not even offer the lesser known as a separate *ossia*, leaving a fairly large discrepancy in their two editions of the works. According to Johannes Gerdes, the editor of the Peters edition of the concerto, there are roughly fifty differences in the solo part

Example 1. Mvt. 1, mm. 287-281. Brahms's omission of syncopation between mm. 280-281 that appears in the first edition full score published by Rieter-Biedermann (1875, 50-51).

The image displays two musical excerpts from Johannes Brahms's music. The top excerpt, labeled 'D', shows measures 280-281 from the first edition (1875). It features a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The music is in D major and 3/4 time. The bass line has a strong rhythmic pattern, and the treble line has a more complex, syncopated melody. The bottom excerpt shows the same measures from the collected works edition (1965), where the syncopation in the treble line has been corrected to align with the bass line.

Example 2. Mvt. 1, mm. 280-281. Brahms's correction which creates a syncopation between mm. 280-281 that appears in the collected works full score published by Breitkopf & Härtel (1965, 23).

between the two Rieter-Biedermann editions (2).



Badura-Skoda explains that the alternate variant was one that Brahms himself had crossed out in his personal copy of the first edition (Eulenburg V). While the inclusion of this rhythmic deviation is compelling, it necessitates further adjustment on the part of the performer. The omission of this small quirk in the parallel passage at the end of the movement in the same edition requires the performer to either make the same change of his own artist license or risk weakening the structural integrity of the movement as a result of this small incongruence. It appears that most performers choose the more conventional of the variants for this very reason.

Of the modern editions currently in print, there are two that stand out for the thoroughness of their editing: Edition Eulenburg (1963) and the new Peters edition (2010). The Eulenburg score edited by Badura-Skoda and Wilhelm Altmann is the first modern version to offer detailed source information.¹³ The sources consulted are Brahms's own autograph, the first printed full score (Rieter-Biedermann), which Badura-Skoda singles out for being of "great interest for its changes compared to the manuscript," Brahms's own four-handed arrangement, his own two-piano reduction, and

¹³ Only the 2011 revision of this edition includes a translation of Badura-Skoda's Forward from German to English.

the first edition of the printed score (Eulenburg III). Eulenburg is also the first edition to present major discrepancies and explain their validity historically, and viability practically. The new Edition Peters publication of the concerto goes a step further than the Eulenburg. Using the 1983 version edited by Johannes Gerdes as a starting point, Badura-Skoda reconciles Gerdes' already thorough source work with his own discoveries in the years since. The Peters edition also highlights the various elements that Brahms only included in his first handwritten manuscript. Of these, two bear special mention. The first, as seen in Example 3, is the aforementioned inclusion of the text that Brahms penciled in underneath the orchestral opening:

Example 3. Mvt. 2, mm. 1-5. Brahms's original text inscription for the melodic line as it appears in the Peters Edition edited by Paul Badura-Skoda (2010, 47).

Adagio

Be - - ne di - - ctus, qui ve - - nit in no-mi-ne Do - mi - ni.

The second is a fascinating matter of articulation. Gerdes notes,

Brahms distinguished clearly in the manuscript between staccato dots and dashes (upright lines) which evidently demand an execution deviating from the normal staccato. In the Symphonies published by Simrock, Berlin, these lines are reproduced as wedges. On the whole though, music printers during the second half of the 19th century no longer used these marks. Thus, every time a dash occurs in the manuscript of the Fourth Symphony for example, one can find the remark made in the arranger's handwriting: '*Strichpunkte*' (strokes), but in the print it is all unified to dots. Also in the Piano Concerto

No. 1 all dashes have been replaced by staccato dots. In the present new edition the differentiation of the articulation intended by Brahms has been maintained. (Gerdes 1983, 3)

This articulation only appears in the piano reduction of the orchestral part, and parallel spots in the solo part are either left unmarked or revert to the traditional staccato marking. The upright dash that Gerdes refers to is used by Brahms in a way that indicates an articulation sharper than staccato. The Peters edition appears in a two-piano reduction, while the Eulenburg provides the full score.

There is no shortage of other editions to choose from. Gerdes explains his updating of the research used in the Breitkopf & Härtel Complete Works,

Gál, who was responsible for the revision of the first Piano Concerto (1st Complete Edition, 1927), consistently preferred the [Rieter-Biedermann] edition for solo piano and confined himself to mentioning five passages in his critical report, where the two editions came into conflict with each other. He presumed that the edition of the full score, having been printed so much later, had not been attended with the same amount of care both by composer and publisher. The fact that Brahms listed in his private copy of the full score in pencil the version of the edition for solo in two places support this supposition, also the circumstance that the printed score contains some – albeit insignificant – mistakes. Strangely enough, Gál did not consider the autograph score which in 1907 passed on from the estate of Joseph Joachim to the Berliner Staatsbibliothek. The collation with the autograph score, however, shows that Brahms made numerous changes in the piano solo part *after* the edition for solo piano had appeared. (Gerdes 3)¹⁴

Chief among the important sources is Brahms's own transcription of the concerto for one piano, four hands. This version dates to 1864 and is considered to be the most accurate text that Brahms put forth (Gerdes 1983, 2).¹⁵ This transcription was first

¹⁴ The Dover and Kalmus editions are reprints of the Gál Breitkopf and Härtel.

¹⁵ Confirming this is the proximity of date of the revision to the date of the completion of

published by Rieter-Biedermann as they had the rights to the concerto in the original and subsequent forms.¹⁶ In addition to the piano-four hand version, Brahms's own two-piano reduction is an important document as it presumably gives us a glimpse into what the original two-piano sonata might have looked like. Of course, the musical tract of a concerto with a clear delineation of importance between soloist and orchestra is vastly different from the chamber music textures of most works written specifically for two pianos. Even so, it is tempting to imagine that some of Brahms's original thought process might have influenced the reduction.

One more source that provides insight into the performance practice of the concerto in the 20th century is Leonard Bernstein's annotated score circa 1968. The edition used is from the Breitkopf complete works. Bernstein's markings reveal his treatment of the orchestral score not merely as an accompaniment, but that he took great care to give shape to every line, balance the sections precisely, and present the concerto as a work of symphonic magnitude. Though Bernstein's annotated copy does not add any new information about historic practices, it serves a purpose that is arguably just as valuable: it demonstrates Brahms's role in developing the concerto genre into a major symphonic form befitting the grandiosity of the romantic era.

the concerto. The general trend concerning various sources of the concerto dictates that the revisions and transcriptions that Brahms made closest to the completion of the original manuscript are the most trustworthy.

¹⁶ Dover Publications issued a reprint in 1991, providing easy access to such a valuable source.

Henle Verlag is currently preparing their own complete works edition of Brahms's music and has already released the Second Piano Concerto, op. 83 in both the full score and piano reduction variants. Taking into consideration the thorough sourcing and meticulous compiling of Henle's op. 83, any future publication of the concerto could prove to be another worthwhile resource.

CHAPTER 3

BRAHMS'S PERFORMANCE OF HIS OWN WORKS

Brahms fancied himself an able pianist technically and in his youth considered the opportunities to make a career as a performer boundless. His optimistic assessment of his abilities would go on to be severely challenged as Brahms began performing the concerto. His previous works never required him to ply such emotional depths, organize such immense structures, and surmount such technical difficulties.

From the sizable number of secondhand accounts of his playing, Brahms has to be considered one of the most polarizing pianists in the history of the instrument. Known as a player of incredible depth, he also had a reputation for technical deficiencies, which marred his career. Despite these flaws, those who heard him were mesmerized with the force of will in his interpretations and the exquisite beauty of his phrasing. Robert Schumann was especially taken by his playing:

Sitting at the piano, he began to disclose wonderful regions to us. We were drawn into ever more enchanting spheres. Besides, he is a player of genius who can make of the piano an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices. There were sonatas, veiled symphonies rather; songs, the poetry of which would be understood even without words, although a profound vocal melody runs through them all: single piano pieces, some of them demonic in spirit while graceful in form: again sonatas for piano, string quartets, every work so different from the others that it seemed to stream from a separate source. And then, rushing like a torrent, they were all united by him into a single waterfall, the cascades of which were overarched by a peaceful rainbow, while butterflies played about its borders accompanied by the voices of nightingales. (Musgrave 2000, 121)

It is hardly possible to imagine more effusive praise than this, especially from someone of such high regard in the musical society of the time. As Musgrave confirms, “These characteristics emerge repeatedly in the recollections of his listeners throughout his life”

(Musgrave 2000, 122). Musgrave quotes Walter Hübbe, who was well familiar with Brahms's playing from his time in Hamburg in the 1850s, as saying,

He does not play like a consummately trained, highly intelligent musician making other people's works his own (like, for instance, Hans v. Bülow) but rather like one who is himself creating, who interprets the works of the masters as an equal, not merely reproducing them, but rendering them as if they gushed forth directly and powerfully from his heart. (Musgrave 2000, 122)

The noted Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick wrote of Brahms's first public recital in Vienna in 1839,

Brahms's playing stands in close and most beautiful relationship with his artistic individuality in general. He only wishes to serve the composition, and he avoids almost to the point of shyness any semblance of suggestion of self-importance or show. He has a highly developed technique which lacks only the final brilliant polish, the final muscular self-confidence required of the virtuoso. He treats the purely technical aspect of playing with a kind of negligence, as when, for instance, he shakes octave passages from a relaxed wrist in such a way that the keys are brushed sideways, rather than struck squarely from above. . . He has too many important things in his head and heart to be constantly concerned with his external personal appearance. [But] his playing is always heart-winning and convincing. (Musgrave 2000, 122-123)

As the reviews and recollections of Brahms's playing are parsed, what emerges is a consistent account of a pianist who was consumed entirely with the music and dispensed entirely with the showmanship that was so common at that time.¹⁸ The noted composer

¹⁸ To give proper context to Brahms's most unusual musical approach, one must remember that Liszt was still concertizing, noted virtuoso Sigismond Thalberg was only four years removed from the height of his popularity, Hans von Bülow was in the prime of his career, and the Russian virtuoso school was only in the first years of its existence and had not yet come to prominence internationally. Brahms was operating in a manner that was diametrically opposed to the performance traditions of the time period he was living in.

and friend of Brahms, Charles Stanford remarked after hearing an early performance of the B flat Piano Concerto,

His piano playing was not so much that of a finished pianist, as of a composer who despised virtuosity. The skips, which are many and perilous in the solo part, were accomplished regardless of accuracy, and it is no exaggeration to say that there were handfuls of wrong notes. The touch was somewhat hard and lacking in force-control; it was at its best in the slow movement where he produced the true velvety quality, probably because he was not so hampered by his own difficulties. But never since have I heard a rendering of the concerto, so complete in its outlook or so big in its interpretation. The wrong notes did not really matter, they did not disturb his hearers any more than himself. He took it for granted that the public knew that he had written the right notes, and did not worry himself over such little trifles as hitting the wrong ones. His attitude at the piano was precisely that in Professor von Beckerath's sketch. The short legs straight down to the pedals, which seemed only just to reach, the head thrown back and slightly tilted as if listening to the band rather than to himself, the shoulders hunched up and the arms almost as straight as the legs and well above the keyboard. (Musgrave 2000, 125)¹⁹

As Musgrave notes, it was these technical shortfalls that forced Brahms to give up “recital playing in the 1870's, his technical inconsistencies [becoming] more troublesome to listeners not prepared for them, or not sympathetic towards him” (124).

Much of what has been said about Brahms's playing deals with the tremendous depth and variety of sound he was able to elicit from the instrument, aptly described by Musgrave, who offered two telling quotes. One is Brahms's complaint that “the good players of the present day have no touch.” The other is Rudolf von den Leyen's observation that, “Force as such had no place in his playing. Indeed, he never demanded

¹⁹ The “sketch” Stanford is referring to is Willy von Beckerath's famous portrait of the grey-bearded Brahms at the piano, hands-crossed, cigar dangling, presumably playing the G minor Rhapsody, op.79 no.2.

more of an instrument than it was capable of giving without overstepping the bounds of artistic beauty” Musgrave himself notes that Brahms “shared Clara’s belief in creating a beautiful tone by coaxing the sound from the instrument. “These observations are important in relation to Brahms’s own piano writing, which makes immense demands” (Musgrave 2000, 124).

As might be expected, the composition of a concerto presented Brahms with the perfect vehicle to further his career as a pianist. That the concerto was to serve this purpose couldn’t have been Brahms’s initial intention, considering his transformation of the piece into several forms during its gestation, including its short life as a piano-less symphony.²¹ In his essay on Brahms as a performer of his own works, Roger Moseley writes that Brahms’s teacher “Eduard Marxsen (to whom Brahms would later dedicate the Second Piano Concerto) recalled that his pupil’s progress ‘was indeed remarkable, but not such as to give evidence of exceptional talent, only the results of great industry and unremitting zeal.’ Despite (or perhaps because of) his natural shortcomings, Brahms sustained ambitions of becoming a true virtuoso throughout the 1850s, and the work around which they coalesced was the First Piano Concerto, op.15”.²² Moseley also notes

²¹ There is also no evidence that it was written with someone else in mind. Clara Schumann was certainly a willing advisor to Brahms and was an active participant in playing through whatever spots the young composer found troublesome and dispensing advice, but the work that he was preparing for her at that time would eventually become the C minor piano quartet. And though Hans von Bülow was a major advocate of the concerto and Brahms’s music in general, he was not the inspiration for the work either.

²² It must be noted that during the 1850s Brahms harbored numerous such ambitions which almost always ran parallel to what Clara Schumann was doing professionally. It was during those years that Brahms wanted to become an organ “virtuoso” so that he

that the genre of the concerto presented Brahms “with the chance to star as the protagonist of his own musical drama” (Frisch 2009, 139). Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine any composer who writes for their instrument without on some level, be it conscious or sub-conscious, tailoring the writing to their technical strengths and personal tastes. As such, it is no surprise that Brahms’s two entries for piano and orchestra were so all-encompassing structurally, musically, and technically, nor is it a surprise that he labored as he did in writing them. A keen familiarity with piano technique seems to have been as much a burden as it was an advantage for Brahms. In the end, the concerto does not come off as overwrought, and that is owed that to Brahms’s superb pianistic and musical sensibilities.

The premiere of the concerto on January 22, 1859 in Hanover, was, as Swafford puts it, “neither success nor disaster” (188). The critical response to this first hearing of the work was lukewarm and ambiguous with one critic saying of the concerto, “The work, with all its serious striving, its rejection of triviality, its skilled instrumentation, seemed difficult to understand, even dry, and in parts eminently fatiguing” (188). The concerto had betrayed the qualities that had come to be expected from the genre. Swafford notes that Brahms “knew what the public expected from concertos: virtuosic brilliance, dazzling cadenzas, not too many minor keys, not too long, not too tragic. To the degree that those were the rules, the concerto violated every one of them. The piece

could travel with her on her tours and perform organ recitals in the cities she was giving concerts in. He also had the idea of becoming a flute “virtuoso” so that he may share the stage with her. Though these musical desires could conceivably have come from a genuine place, his ambitions of becoming a piano virtuoso were also possibly intended to impress Clara.

was bound to take time to make its way” (188). The rehearsals leading up to the Leipzig performance on January 27th were, as Swafford described, ominous. The orchestra and conductor were vocal in their dislike for the music. Those who attended the first rehearsal in the *Leipzig Gewandhaus* were unimpressed, and the second rehearsal came and went with nobody showing up to listen at all. Also conspicuous in her absence was Clara Schumann, on whom Brahms had relied to calm his usual nervousness (Swafford 188-189). Swafford gives an intriguing account of the performance itself:

When his turn came, he stepped onto the platform to polite applause. The conductor raised his baton; the ominous low D filled the hall. Brahms sat through his orchestral introduction which seemed longer than ever, trying to subdue his nerves. He began the first solo and the chains of thirds fell into place; he was playing well. With his mind on his job, he went through the first movement pleased at how the piece was going from all of them. In those days audiences customarily applauded between movements, and sometimes called for an immediate encore. After the first movement there was a resounding silence. After the adagio, the same. When the finale had raced to its end and Brahms sat waiting at the piano, from the hall he heard three pairs of hands tentatively brought together, their hollow echo followed by an explosion of hisses. It was then that Brahms realized he had a nightmare fiasco on his hands. Trembling, he rose amid that wave of repudiation, bowed curtly, shook the conductor’s hands, and retreated from the stage with what dignity he could muster. The hisses followed him like furies...He (Brahms) also knew that the reception had only partly to do with this particular piece. Since Schumann’s “*Neue Bahnen*”²³ Leipzig conservatives had looked on him as a threat to their idol Mendelssohn, and this concerto—at least the first movement—was as un-Mendelssohnian as possible. Now the conservatives had their revenge. (Swafford, 1997, 189-190)

²³ *Neue Bahnen* (New Paths) was an article written by Robert Schumann after relinquishing his position as editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. In it he praised Brahms effusively and anointed him the guardian of the classical music tradition for the next generation. It was in this article that Schumann first publicly called for Brahms to begin writing symphonic music and also helped establish Brahms’s reputation.

Brahms himself adopted an admirably resolute and defiant attitude following the performance as evidenced by his letter to Joachim written the next day:

I think it's the best thing that could happen to one, it forces you to collect your thoughts and it raises your courage. After, all I'm still trying and groping. But the hissing was really too much, wasn't it? . . . For all that, one day, when I've improved its physical structure, this concerto will please, and a second one will sound very different. (Steinberg 1998, 110)

As Swafford explains, there was at least one group of people who were enamored by the work:

If that were not depressing enough, Brahms discovered that one faction was pleased about the programmatic impact of the opening and in some degree ready to embrace his concerto – Liszt's circle. The *Neue Zeitschrift für Music* critic wrote, 'Notwithstanding its undeniable want of outward effect, we regard the poetic contents of the concerto as an unmistakable sign of significant and original creative power; and, in light of the belittling criticism of a certain portion of the public and press, we consider it our duty to insist on the admirable sides of the work.' It was the ultimate humiliation: his best review came from the enemy, who claimed his concerto as a blow for their cause. If soldiers of the New German School hoped to recruit Brahms, however, he was not going to sign up. Liszt was in town that week to confer with *Neue Zeitschrift* editor [Franz] Brendel. Brahms pointedly avoided both of them. (Swafford 1997, 190-191)²⁴

²⁴ The conflict between Brahms and the *Neue Zeitschrift*, and as a result, Liszt, was an entirely philosophical one. Brahms belonged to and spearheaded the conservative musical circle which believed in the absolute quality of music and staunchly avoiding the prescription of programmatic meaning to a work. In addition, they believed that the opposition was writing music that was largely formless. The new school, of which Liszt was the leader, believed that forms needed to evolve with the times and that in doing so, needed to function in a way that best served the purpose of the music. Both sides believed themselves ideological and spiritual descendants of Beethoven. In light of this musical cold war, the support of Brahms's concerto could be considered as more of a taunt than a genuine display of solidarity. That this review was published in the *Neue Zeitschrift* of all places, the publication that Robert Schumann had so fastidiously edited, and the publication that Brahms surely viewed as unceremoniously hijacked by Liszt and his cadre, must have been another element of bitter disappointment emanating from the Leipzig debacle. One also has to marvel at the audacity of a young and to that point, relatively unestablished Brahms to take on so major a musical figure as Franz Liszt.

Ultimately, Brahms soon found vindication in Hamburg, the city that refused him a decent piano for his first attempt at a premiere of the concerto. Swafford writes,

He offered his immense and notorious concerto. After the debacle in Leipzig, Brahms was stunned to find some homegrown enthusiasm gathering around him. The concert was a sellout, with hundreds turned away. Directly afterward he wrote Clara that he, Joachim, and Julius Stockhausen (who contributed an aria) had been encored and the reviews appreciative: 'In short, the Leipzig critics have done no harm'. (194)²⁵

The problematic reception of the concerto undoubtedly served to change Brahms's enthusiasm for performing and likely led to his indifferent and at times hostile attitude towards the public. The support and advocacy of Robert Schumann that helped cement his reputation in Austro-German cultural society (and ultimately proved to be his undoing in Leipzig) was no longer available. The response to the concerto, the writing of which had occupied eight trying years, was damaging to his confidence, which up to that point had been very high. His assertion to Joachim that the second piano concerto would be vastly different could be viewed as a proclamation meant to convince himself as much as anyone else that he was still capable of greatness.

The concerto ultimately played a large part in shaping Brahms's pianistic style. Not only was it panned by critics as being uninteresting, Brahms's playing was also condemned as "not [attaining] the standard that we have a right to expect of today's concert pianists" by critic Eduard Bernsdorf (Frisch 139). Not helping matters was the

²⁵ It is fair to wonder whether the Hamburgian fervor surrounding Brahms was not so much a matter of a native son of relative fame giving a concert, but more a fascination to hear if the concerto which was so brutalized in Leipzig was indeed as atrocious as advertised.

inevitable comparison to Liszt, who was the leading pianist of the time. Brahms recognized Liszt's prodigious technique, noting that, "His piano-playing was something unique, incomparable, and inimitable" (Frisch 139). Brahms's introverted manner and trance-like state at the piano was a complete contrast. His disdain for spectacle simply did not align with the cultural norms of the time, and his physical appearance did not meet with the expected standard of refinement, especially for a native German. There was nothing effortless about his playing, which in constant comparison with Liszt, began to look labored. It is possible that the cold reception the concerto received was as much due to Brahms's inability to properly convey the work as it was to the public's dislike of the music itself.

Almost twenty years later, for Brahms, the reception of the concerto became connected to the success of his performance of the second. The better the critical reception of his piano playing in the second was, the more audiences seemed to appreciate the beauty of the first concerto. Both works imposed robust demands on him as a soloist, but the first was written with the intention of being a purely virtuosic concerto, whereas the second was written avoiding virtuosity for virtuosity's sake. Brahms had vowed that his second concerto would be different and in this regard he delivered. There is no one thing that makes the B flat Concerto difficult, such as the octave trills and octave runs that make the concerto a high-wire act. Instead, Brahms crafted a work in which the job of the soloist is ever changing. To be sure, there are vast leaps, octave fireworks, scales in thirds, and it is a technical tour de force, but these concerns were seemingly buried under years of musical maturation and didn't offer enough innovation to entice those who had grown accustomed to Liszt's pianistic

pyrotechnics. This might explain why Brahms's limitations were so transparent when he performed the second piano concerto; he never seemed to master it enough to let anyone forget how difficult it was, and the difficulties were ones that had long since been conquered.

Brahms, however, wasn't suffering from a case of not being Liszt. His undoing in the eyes of the critics and later audiences was ultimately his tendency to write music that exceeded his technique. Brahms fashioned a unique solution to this problem: he began writing exercises for the piano. As Moseley points out, the entire collection was "written over the course of several decades" and only published as a collection in 1893 (142). What is most interesting, as Moseley also notes, is that the writing of these exercises "emerged in parallel with the writing of Brahms's most challenging piano works. Although most of the *Übungen* were written in the 1850s and 1860s, about twenty of the fifty-one exercises date from the early 1880s, and they were almost certainly practice aids for Brahms's performances of the Second Piano Concerto" (142). It is rare that we get to see a composer's retrospective view of his own music, but in the case of the fifty-one exercises, Brahms shows us just that. There is not one of the fifty-one exercises that cannot be traced back to technical challenges in the second concerto. Taking into account that Brahms utilized the two concerti as touring pieces with himself frequently manning the keyboard, the exercises lay out the methodology of his technical practice. These aren't the standard issue etudes that were written for their students' benefit. The fifty-one exercises that Brahms wrote were meant as a personal tool for the maintenance and advancement of his technique. We know from the accounts of his pupil Florence May

that Brahms considered technical clarity nothing more than a means to a greater end. She recalled,

Brahms in fact recognized no such thing as what is sometimes called ‘neat playing’ of the compositions of either Bach, Scarlatti, or Mozart. Neatness and equality of finger were imperatively demanded by him, and in their utmost nicety and perfection, but as a preparation, not as an end. Varying and sensitive expression was to him as the breath of life, necessary to the true interpretation of any work of genius, and he did not hesitate to avail himself of such resources of the modern pianoforte as he felt helped to impart it; no matter in what particular century his composer may have lived, or what may have been the peculiarities of excellencies and limitation of the instruments of his day.

Whatever the music I might be studying, however, he would never allow any kind of ‘expression made easy.’ He particularly disliked chords to be spread unless marked so by the composer for the sake of a special effect. ‘No arpegge’ he used invariably to say if I unconsciously gave way to the habit, or yielded to the temptation of softening a chord by its means. He made very much of the well-known effect of two notes slurred together, whether in a loud or soft tone, and I know from his insistence to me on this point that the mark had special significance in his music. (Musgrave 2000, 130)

In his essay on Brahms’s playing, Sherman elaborates,

Florence May reports that when Brahms gave her piano lessons in 1871 he ‘particularly disliked chords to be spread unless marked so by the composer for the sake of a special effect.’ His preferences sounds modern. But Moritz Rosenthal reports that when Brahms played in the 1890s, he rolled most of his chords. Brahms doesn’t seem to have fallen into this old-fashioned practice only as he aged, since he was criticized for the ‘unremitting spreading of chords in slower tempi’ in 1865. (Musgrave 2003, 2)

It was a typically Brahmsian case of “Do as I say, not as I do!”²⁶ Florence May’s accounts also stress the importance that Brahms placed on purposefulness in technical

²⁶ By all accounts, May’s playing was refined and she was an advanced student. For this reason, Brahms’s instructions to her can be taken at face value. In addition, Brahms’s familiarity with early keyboard practices could account for his predilection for such arpeggiations. This does not, however, justify this habit permeating other music.

practice and as he had done with the advent of his own exercises, catering this practice to the issues posed by the repertoire she was working on:

After hearing me play through a study from Clementi's "Gradus ad Parnassum" he immediately set to work to loosen and equalize my fingers. Beginning that very day he gradually put me through an entire course of technical training, showing me how I should best work, for the attainment of my end, at scales, arpeggi, double notes, and octave. . . He did not believe in the utility for me of the daily practice of the ordinary five-finger exercises, preferring to form exercises from any piece or study upon which I might be engaged. He had a great habit of turning a difficult passage around and making me practice it, not as written, but with other accents and in various figures, with the result that when I again tried it as it stood the difficulties had always considerably diminished, and often entirely disappeared. (Musgrave 2000, 133)

What May was also very careful to point out is how insistent Brahms was about being faithful to what was in the score. She recalled an instance where she expressed marvel at Brahms's ideas about the interpretation of a Mozart sonata. When she expressed to him that his way of thinking was "quite new to [her]," Brahms replied "It is all there," pointing to the book (Musgrave 129). It is fascinatingly paradoxical that Brahms was so flexible with others' performance of his works and so reverent to the text of the composers he performed.²⁷ But the reasoning behind this is illuminated in a comment he made on playing Beethoven, "When I play something by Beethoven, I have absolutely no individuality in relation to it; rather I try to reproduce the piece as well as Beethoven wrote it. Then I have (quite) enough to do" (Musgrave 2000, 130). This methodology is well in concert with what he expected of others. Sherman, however, does not believe in Brahms's wholesale conviction to the principles he espoused to May:

²⁷ Musgrave notes that this reverence "makes an interesting comparison with earlier comments on the nature of his interpretations" (130).

Perhaps the discrepancy was between what Brahms preached to Ms. May and what he practised all along. Brahms's pronouncements about performance may not reveal exactly how he performed. Even his notations may not. In the Andante Grazioso of his Third Piano Trio, the score indicates that the *quasi animato* middle section should continue at the opening tempo; but Fanny Davies reports that in an actual performance Brahms increased the tempo by about twenty percent. Similar discrepancies arise when considering Brahms's remarks and letters, which are often more vague than his notation to begin with. Avins discusses a rule, proposed to Brahms in a letter by his copyist Robert Keller, whereby lower-case annotations (like *tranquillo*) indicate only expression, while upper-case annotations (*Tranquillo*) indicated a marked change of tempo. Whatever Brahms's policy may have been, Davies documents a clear instance of his violating the principle, by slowing markedly for a lower-case *sostenuto*. On the other hand, how a composer plays may not reflect how he would want his music to be played by others. (Musgrave 2003, 2)

These accounts buoy the idea that some of the most revealing information we have about Brahms's own performance of his works comes from accounts of his teaching style. From these we derive a sense of the pianist Brahms was, the pianist he wanted to be, the pianists he wanted his students to be, and the pianists he admired. One after another, these accounts are told by students totally enamored of their teacher. Furthermore, these recollections include a bounty of vivid descriptions of Brahms's own playing, as he was clearly not shy about demonstrating when needed.

Brahms's ferocious advocacy for the old Viennese musical school is an important element to consider when trying to piece together his personal performance practices. His efforts to preserve the sanctity of his musical forefathers help explain his attention to each detail in the score and the importance for him of this faithfulness likely spawned from his involvement with the time's leading musicologists and his affinity for older music. Karl Geiringer points out that Brahms's personal library contained multitudes of books written by the top musicologists and theoreticians of the time (Geiringer 1983, 463). In addition,

he was a fanatical collector of historical editions of musical works, amassing rare editions of Bach, Scarlatti, Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert's works, several autographs of important works by C. P. E. Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, and Schumann, while eagerly acquiring the newest editions of Bach, Handel, and Schütz as they became available (Geiringer 1983, 464). In addition to his interest in owning and studying these various rare editions, Brahms's musicological endeavors led to his editing and revising works such as Mozart's Requiem, numerous pieces of Schubert, as well as several volumes of the Chopin Collected Edition (Geiringer 1983, 467). Brahms also worked closely with Friedrich Chrysander on the editing of Couperin's keyboard works, a labor which went on to strongly influence some of his later keyboard works (Kelly 2004, 595). Elaine Kelly writes,

Immediate parallels can be drawn between the understated styles of Brahms's late piano works and Couperin's *Pieces de clavecin*; in general terms, both sets of pieces are intimate in their dimensions and expression. It is, however, in Brahms's textures that Couperin's influence can be felt most strongly. Brahms frequently creates textures that are strikingly similar to those arising out of the style of French Baroque harpsichord music, and more specifically the style *brise*. This style, developed by French lutenists to overcome the sustaining and contrapuntal limitations of their instrument, was of paramount importance to Couperin's compositional method, and is exploited exhaustively throughout both the *Pieces de clavecin* and the preludes of *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*. Characterized by seamless, almost ethereal textures, Couperin's style *brise* finds its richest expression in his style *luthe* pieces, such as the well-known *Les Baricades Mistérieuses* in the sixth *ordre*. (Kelly, 2004, 595)

Brahms's later keyboard works are full of this same sort of textural implements, featuring thick counterpoint that is at the same time quite clear and translucent.

For Brahms, the editorial process was sacred work and he devoted a great amount of care to it. Geiringer describes this as readily apparent upon a single look at the copy of

Brahms's revisions of Chopin's Mazurkas for the Collected Edition. He writes, "The sheets covered with corrections in black, blue, and red look like a battlefield. The zeal he displayed in this largely anonymous activity explains the great respect with which publishers and scholars alike regarded his editorial activities" (Geiringer 1983, 468). Of the composers whose works Brahms admired and even obsessed over, J.S. Bach had a special place as he frequently programmed various cantatas and was responsible for numerous corrections, revisions, and new realizations of the figured bass in Bach's works (Geiringer 1983, 468-470).

Perhaps it wasn't one hundred percent textual accuracy in his music that Brahms was after, but rather a performance that would do justice to what he wrote and ensure a positive impression.²⁸ The excerpt from Sherman's essay underscores the sometimes ambiguous nature of Brahms's markings and forces us to determine what information we trust. Though there was a clear set of rules proposed to Brahms, it appears as though he never fully took to them. So what to make of Brahms's expressive markings in that case? The flexible nature of Brahms's attitude towards the execution of his own music seems to suggest that performers would be well advised to view them as a broad set of boundaries within which there is ample allowance to roam creatively.

Understanding the tangible qualities that made a good musician and what constituted a convincing rendering in the eyes of Brahms helps us better understand and

²⁸ As is discussed in chapter four, Brahms was hyper-sensitive to what impression was made by performances of his music and often varied the size of the orchestras in his music in accordance to the acoustical qualities of his venues and the occasions of the performances.

contextualize the paradoxical nature of how he preferred his music to be performed. His valuation of emotional depth over technical accuracy and strict adherence to the score sheds some light on what philosophical approaches the modern performer is best advised to take. When trying to equate a composer's own performance habits with how their music should be performed, the process is akin to a sort of musical reverse-engineering. Brahms, who so revered the composers that came before him going back as far as renaissance choral music which he, in part, helped resurrect, is the perfect case study of this. His steadfast dedication to evolving classical music instead of re-inventing it resulted in many of the practices and traditions that so thoroughly permeated his own music. That he was an avid performer was not inconsequential to the kind of music he wrote. That he was never far removed from the ability to execute his works imbued them with an effectiveness that functions regardless of interpretational style. It is altogether possible that Brahms knew that performers couldn't operate if they were rigidly boxed into a certain style and appreciated the relative flexibility that interpretation was conducive to. Finson summarizes,

Nineteenth-century performers did not "feel" the music, they crafted its performance, and though their practice was neither arbitrary nor irrational the result was anything but sterile. This approach should be attractive to modern players, for the devices of nineteenth-century performing practice promote great intellectual individuality. The practice consists not so much of rigid requirements as of flexible strategies manipulated to express the view of a particular artist. In a music such as Brahms's, intended for multiple performances over an extended period of time, this performing practice could only be a virtue. (Finson 1984, 475)

As a musician who so deeply internalized the music he performed, he allowed others to interpret his music, so long as they too internalized it.

CHAPTER 4
BRAHMS'S PIANOS AND INSTRUMENTAL
PREFERENCES

Pianos

The discussion of Brahms's preference for instruments, especially the pianos he preferred for composing and those he felt best suited specific works of his, is more defined than his interpretive principles. Robert Schumann's insistence that the often simple nature of Brahms's piano music belied the consistently orchestral magnitude of its construction is borne out by Brahms's selection of pianos for their specific qualities.

Brahms was the beneficiary of living in a unique period in the history of the modern piano. He lived long enough to see the piano evolve from the Erards and Pleyels that Liszt and Chopin used to instruments that were close to the concert grands that are still in use today. As George Bozarth and Stephen Brady explain,

The pianos Johannes Brahms encountered in Hamburg during his youth would have been essentially the same as the early romantic fortepianos of Beethoven and Schubert. By the time Brahms wrote his final composition half a century later, the piano had evolved to a state of constructions—if not hammer design and voicing—virtually identical with the modern instrument.

In light of the advances in piano technology made internationally during the 1850s and 60s, Brahms's [choice of piano], and by extension, the piano ideals of its owner old fashioned. Yet Brahms's correspondence, concert programs, and other documents reveal a pianist performing on a wide variety of instruments, many demonstrating the latest advances in piano building. (Bozarth and Brady 2003, 73)

However, Brahms's implementation of certain pianos for certain purposes did not run a linear chronological course. Sherman writes,

To resolve the controversy over pianos, the pianist Robert Levin has posited a discrepancy, one between Brahms's performance preferences and his compositional practice. Brahms insisted on Steinways or Bechsteins in later performances of his concertos – but it does not necessarily follow that he optimized his later compositions for such instruments. Brahms continued to keep a straight-strung Viennese-action piano in his living quarters; Levin, based on his experience as a player, believes that Brahms's style of writing in his late piano works presupposes the balances found in the older instrument. (Musgrave 2003, 2)

What Brahms's insistence on Steinways and Bechsteins for performances of his concerti later on tells us is that he favored the larger, reinforced sounds of those instruments for cutting through the large orchestrations and recognized that the pianos that were available when he wrote the concerti (certainly the First) were no longer optimal. However, his refusal to dispense with his older instrument forces us to wonder whether Brahms wrote such intimate piano music in his later years because he had possession of a piano that was ideally suited for that style or whether he kept the piano because as Levin said, it “presupposed” the music he intended to write?

The older piano in question was a seven-foot Streicher grand dating from 1868 which was gifted to him by the manufacturer when Brahms moved to Vienna in 1871 (Musgrave 2003, 13). Avins notes that “Despite his admiration for Bechstein and American Steinways, and the fact that he could have easily afforded either one, he kept and enjoyed the Streicher until his death” (Musgrave 2003, 13). Avins also notes that Brahms proclivity towards the Streicher did not extend beyond its use in his home:

He writes...in 1873 to the critic, his friend Adolf Schubring: ‘I consider Streicher to be good and reliable...I like them quite a lot in a room, and for myself, even now, cannot get used to the local grand pianos in the concert halls’; by ‘local pianos’ he presumably was also implying Bösendorfer instruments...given the choice between the two Viennese pianos, Brahms wrote to a young pianist coming to make his debut in Vienna that ‘Frau Schumann, Hiller and my worthless self-play Streichers.’ But on the famous

occasion when Eugen d'Albert performed both Brahms piano concertos in one evening under Brahms's direction (with the Vienna Philharmonic, January 1896), the piano on stage was a Bechstein. (Musgrave 2003, 13)

The later works involving piano are significantly more introverted in nature than those of his early and middle years. The Trio for clarinet, cello and piano, op. 114, marked the shift in Brahms's approach to piano writing in chamber music that the Violin sonata, op. 100, seemed to predict. As for his works for solo piano, the op. 116 piano pieces represented a move towards a far more personal musical language. In opp. 116, 117, 118 and 119 (the emotional and musical culmination of Brahms's solo piano output) we also see a simplification of the piano technique employed. This isn't to say that the pieces are easy by any standard, but rather that they are more texturally precise and as a result, more concise.

In her essay on Brahms's instruments, Avins discredits the notion that Brahms's use of the Streicher as the instrument he composed on as no more than a matter of his being "unfussy about his home furnishings." She also posits that Brahms would not have taken issue with the later piano works being performed on a modern instrument based on his letters, though she doesn't specify which letters and what their content actually is (Musgrave 2003, 14). However, the solo piano pieces and chamber works are not concert works in the manner of the piano concerti, the performance of which would occupy a large venue and therefore require a more muscular instrument. Also working against her theory is her assertion that Brahms had the means to afford a Steinway or Bechstein of his choosing had he found the Streicher unsuitable (Musgrave 2003, 13). The most conclusive piece of evidence to disprove Brahms's ownership of the Streicher as mere indifference is this quote from the composer himself:

It is quite a different matter to write for instruments whose characteristics and sound one only incidentally has in one's head and which one can only hear mentally—than to write for an instrument which one knows through and through, as I know the piano. There I always know exactly what I write and why I write one way or another. (Cai 61)

Though this quote appears to address the issue in more general terms, Brahms's mention of an instrument which he "knows through and through" could also be taken in a more specific sense, as he composed primarily on one piano for the last twenty-four years of his life.

What then are the qualities of the Streicher piano that Brahms found so ideal for composing? Camilla Cai was successful in tracking down one of the few functional Streichers from that era and discusses her findings:

This piano, built only two years later, was probably quite similar to Brahms's, and although it is not in particularly good repair, elements of its original character still exist, for example the light touch and delicate sound. In all ranges its sound is quiet but well defined. The three main ranges — bass, middle, and treble — have distinct timbres, and, as the volume increases, those timbres change quite significantly. These features contrast markedly with the prized evenness of timbre on a modern piano. The Streicher's frame, consisting of only two cast-iron tension bars bolted to the metal string plate, supports the straight-strung mechanism and the sound board. This fairly weak, incomplete metal frame requires stringing the piano to a slightly lower tension than that possible on the full, single-piece, metal frame available on technologically more advanced pianos. The Streicher's resulting 'woodwind' sound lacks the brilliance, the slightly metallic tinge and the volume of sound found in pianos with a one-piece metal frame. The straight-strung feature means that the Streicher has shorter, thicker bass strings than a comparably-sized cross-strung piano. Probably because of this shorter length and greater thickness, these strings have few upper partials. The resulting bass sound is of special clarity, openness, and lightness.

The Streicher's Viennese action with its soft, leather-covered hammers differs in weight, but not design, from the actions Nanette Streicher made in the 1810s and 20s. This design, completely different from the double-escapement repetition actions of English pianos, produces an especially crisp attack of sound followed by an immediate, very rapid decay. Because the action is lighter weight than a modern repetition action, the key feels

very responsive. For a pianissimo effect the stroke may seem to require extra pressure, but any increase in dynamics needs only the most minute adjustment of pressure. In addition, the shallow key depth needs only short finger strokes. Overall, the piano seems to require that the fingers move with small, quick, and delicate motions. Two other Streichers in good repair, now in Edmund M. Frederick's collection — an 1868 straight-strung made only months before Brahms's piano and an 1875 cross-strung — confirm the light, clear sound and the delicate touch necessary to play them. (Cai 60)

Cai's account of the qualities that the Streichers of that time possessed and a look at the demands on the instrument of the later works with piano corroborate the theory that Brahms did indeed write specifically with the instrument in mind. Even the most muscular of the solo piano pieces, the Rhapsody in E \flat , op. 119 no. 4, utilizes the bass register in a way that seems to suggest the clarity of the Streicher's lower registers. Cai suggests, however, that there is a different registration that may have been even more inspired by the Streicher's sound:

The textures Brahms chooses for the late piano pieces (opp. 116, 117, 118 and 119) reveal his clarity of intent to produce a defined, balanced piano sound. The importance of this textural balance reveals itself in many ways, for example, in Brahms's frequent tenor melodies, in his distinctive handling of the bass range, and in the use of symbols and words that indicate, among other things, touch and articulation. All of these elements can be shown to have been influenced by the properties of the nineteenth-century piano and need to be understood in respect to its capabilities. (Cai 62)

Furthering this notion, Bozarth and Brady write,

[...] though he had an 1868 Streicher in his apartment in Vienna for the last two and a half decades of his life, and though he might still have considered it ideal for the more intimate of his piano pieces (opp. 116-119), the grand pianos on which he preferred to perform his two concertos late in life — Bösendorfers when in Vienna and environs, Bechsteins and Steinways when in Germany — incorporated many of the latest innovations. Nonetheless, it would be illogical to maintain that Brahms intended all of his keyboard music for the Steinway, just because in his final decade he found instruments by that maker that he especially liked. (Frisch 88)

There is also a fair amount of fascination concerning the similarity of the New York Steinways that Brahms felt worked best for the concerti and the ones that are widely used today. Bozarth and Brady report that the action that found its way into the instruments of Brahms's period was "for all intents and purposes, technologically the same as in the modern Steinway" (Frisch 87). Much like she did with the Streicher, Avins sought out two instruments from that time, an 1888 model O (what is now the M) and Paderewski's 1892 concert grand and compared them with a 1927 M that was rebuilt in 1979.²⁹ She writes: "The 1888 piano has, to my senses, much the feel and sound of the 1927 piano, differing no more than do any two similarly built pianos one from the other" (Musgrave 2003, 14). As for Paderewski's piano, Avins found it to be dull in color and relatively quiet compared to her expectations of a nine-foot concert grand. She dismisses this issue as having to do with a sound board that was 110 years old and had in her words, "lost its luster." Despite the faulty soundboard, her general findings are that "regardless of the details, one thing [is] abundantly clear: the differences between a well-maintained old Steinway and a modern, rebuilt instrument are negligible in comparison to the differences between them and any Erard, Streicher, Graf, Pleyel, Broadwood, or Viennese-action Bösendorfer" (Musgrave 2003, 14). Bozarth and Brady, however, give an entirely different account of the Paderewski Steinway:

Jon Finson has described the 1892 Steinway... as having 'great clarity of tone, penetration, and a soft overall sound' and being 'more acoustically efficient, emphasizing the fundamental tone of each note, with less pronounced overtones than a modern Steinway.' Finson continues: 'As a

²⁹ This Paderewski Steinway, which was purchased for his 1892-93 American tour is currently housed in the Smithsonian (Frisch 87).

result, the pianist was able to produce sound with a lighter touch, and the sound was not so massive as that of a modern instrument.’ (Bozarth and Brady 87)³⁰

It is interesting to note that although the sound is described as “not as massive” in comparison with a modern Steinway D, Brahms himself heralded the concert Steinway and Bechstein as well, for its power. He wrote to Julius von Bernuth in advance of a Hamburg performance of his Second Piano Concerto on January 6, 1882: “Since I do have to trouble you about a grand piano, I shall ask if I shall find a very good and *powerful* Bechstein (or American Steinway) waiting for me” (Frisch 86). Bozarth and Brady further the notion by explaining that “...the power of the instrument [was] a key factor in this particular concerto” and posit that “Brahms’s willingness to accept a Bechstein or a Steinway virtually sight unseen testifies to how reliable he considered these instruments to be” (Frisch 86).

Understanding what was available to Brahms towards the later part of his life helps explain why he ultimately decided that the modern Steinways and Bechsteins were better suited to the piano concerti. However, at the time of he composed the concerto, Brahms did not have anything close to a Steinway, Bechstein, or even Streicher. In fact, the piano which Brahms spent the majority of his younger years composing for was a Graf, very similar to the one owned by the Schumanns that was later gifted to him by

³⁰ The discrepancy in the two accounts of this piano may also have something to do with when these papers were published. Whereas Avins’s essay dates from 1997, Bozarth and Brady’s is from 1990. It is impossible to know how much this piano could have possibly deteriorated within the timeframe of seven or so years, but it is entirely possible that this could have some bearing on the findings of both papers.

Clara. Bozarth and Brady explain that this instrument was, “except for a general increase in size and weight, virtually identical with that of Beethoven’s famous Graf” (Frisch 76). Although it might seem unlikely that this piano could hold up well in a piece such as the concerto with its thick orchestration and thunderous piano writing, Bozarth and Brady refer to Jörg Demus’s recording on a 1839 Graf that is similar to what Brahms had at his disposal:

[...] the sound is well focused, resonant but transparent, and ranges from delicate and harplike to robust. Differences in tonal color from one register to another are clearly in evidence and are put to particularly good use in ‘orchestral’ works like Beethoven’s *Diabelli* Variations. With leather-covered hammers and dampers, the attack is clean, the damping efficient. This instrument is truly a joy to hear, and one can easily imagine how exciting Brahms’s earliest works would have sounded on it at the Schumanns’ home... (Bozarth and Brady 79)

This confirms that although the concerto was intended to function differently on a Graf than it did on a modern concert grand like those that Brahms came to prefer, it functioned well as a result of a broad spectrum of colors and a clean attack that would have helped it come through a large orchestra. One other thing to consider is that the size of orchestras was also relatively smaller toward the beginning of Brahms’s career as compared to later, when pianos like Steinways and Bechsteins became not only luxuries, but necessities. Furthermore, the concerto employs textures in the middle registers that are rather unusual for Brahms and can often times sound cluttered. One has to imagine that the Graf’s transparent sound and clean attack also explain why Brahms was keen on using thick

textures in this concerto, whereas once he took possession of the Streicher, his writing thinned somewhat, presumably in keeping with the newer piano's larger sound.³²

Orchestras

For all of the difficulties Brahms encountered writing works for orchestra, primarily the concerto and the first symphony, he possessed a distinct curiosity about the acoustic possibilities of a large orchestra. As someone who had suffered his share of poor debuts with his compositions, he cultivated a keen understanding of what size orchestras to use when and which venues best complimented the type of orchestration a particular piece of his featured.

Op. 15 can be considered the first truly symphonic piano concerto. The relatively conventional instrumentation belies the density of the scoring (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings), as often times, the writing sounds more like a foreshadowing of Wagner than a composer whose place in history is that of a traditionalist determined to preserve the classicist tradition. The piece opens with the violence of a prolonged timpani roll, and the tension does not relent often or for very long.³³ With all of this in mind, the orchestral writing never overshadows the solo part, due in large part to Brahms's meticulous approach to texture and balance. The result of

³² An important element to the discussion of Brahms's instruments is his approach to pedaling. This is discussed at length in the section on pedaling in chapter 5.

³³ That Brahms even orchestrated the opening of the concerto for effect represents a sharp departure from his normal convention which dictated the need for abstractness in music.

the thick orchestration is not merely sheer volume, but rather a warmth and richness of sound that complements the solo piano.

That Brahms's writing is so conducive to large orchestral forces is not altogether surprising considering Robert Schumann's statements regarding the orchestral nature of his earlier piano works. However, even Schumann could not have predicted the lengths Brahms would go to in his experimentation with the size and balance of an orchestra. Avins describes Brahms as a pragmatist who, despite his willingness to make use of the orchestral sizes available to him, never missed an opportunity to express his eagerness for more. She writes,

By the time of the premiere of his Third Symphony op. 90, the violin section of the Vienna Philharmonic usually consisted of eighteen firsts, twelve seconds, twelve violas, ten cellos, and ten double basses. When Brahms offered parts for the symphony in these numbers, he added 'but I have more, if you want them', and there is no reason to believe that he did not mean what he implied: that he would have been happy with an even larger string section." (Avins 2003, 16)

She also notes that "the orchestra for the Music Festival of the Lower Rhine, at which many of Brahms's works were played over the years, was very large." She references an 1868 performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in which the orchestra had twenty-four cellos and eighteen double basses (Musgrave 2003, 18).³⁴

Not everyone is in agreement with the assertion that Brahms would have preferred a large orchestra as a rule. In his essay on conducting Brahms, Roger Norrington makes the case for a more conservative number of players and argues that due to Brahms's

³⁴ Avins's essay also recalls an amusing anecdote of a concert where an orchestra was reinforced by using prisoners from the Franco-Prussian war while soldiers stood guard with their bayonets trained on them (Musgrave 18).

“intricate contrapuntal structure, rhythmic precision and interplay of figures, which is so often likened to chamber music,” the orchestral forces that suit Wagner so well “probably had a more distorting effect on the performance of his music...” (Musgrave 1999, 232).

Norrington also attempts to put the size of orchestras into a historical context. He writes,

German orchestras of the 1870s were generally no bigger than those of the 1830s, when Mendelssohn was in charge of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra: that is, eight to ten first violins was still the tradition. This naturally affects the balance of strings, woodwinds, and brass. The Gewandhaus layout was of nine firsts, eight seconds, five violas, five cellos, and four basses. When Joachim gave the first British performance of Brahms’s Symphony No. 1 at Cambridge, he had nine firsts, nine seconds, six violas, four cellos, and three basses. Brahms was obviously happy with this number: for the premiere of No. 4 at Meiningen he was offered more but turned them down. Although it is true that there were sometimes large string forces for festivals and charity concerts (just as in Haydn’s and Beethoven’s time), it was then customary to double the woodwind in proportion. The Vienna Philharmonic, with its unusually large string body (twelve firsts instead of nine), regularly performed with doubled winds. The modern complement of seventy string players creating a “wall-to-wall” string sound against single woodwind considerably alters the sound balance Brahms would have assumed. (Avins 1999, 239)

Norrington also makes mention of the intimacy of the concert halls in which Brahms’s music was commonplace during his life:

In considering issues of balance, one cannot of course ignore the most important factor in the production of sound from the orchestra – the room and its acoustic properties. Halls can work for or against the character of the music. We must realise how intimate the whole business was in such halls as the old Leipzig Gewandhaus, the Zurich Tonhalle and the Basel Casino. At Bad Kissingen, Bavaria, the surrounding galleries are so close around you that you could almost shake hands with the audience....There is a striking difference [between smaller and larger orchestras], and for me, the context fits the classicism of Brahms’s writing. (Norrington 1999, 240)

Indeed, these halls having been designed to accommodate a certain type of ensemble could very well prove too intimate for oversized orchestras. Countering Norrington’s case for smaller orchestras, Avins offers the following,

Nevertheless, there are some who encourage the performance of Brahms's choral and orchestral music with small forces.³⁵ The reasons seem to be two-fold: the fact that Brahms enjoyed working with the Meiningen Orchestra, widely known for its small number of strings, and the premieres of his First Symphony, *Shicksalslied*, and *Triumphlied* (in complete form) by the small court orchestra in Karlsruhe.

It may be that Brahms preferred to hear his new works performed by a small, well-rehearsed group, a setting which would have enabled him to judge timbres and orchestration better than through the murkier sound of a large orchestra performing in a large hall. . .

He [Brahms] was aware of the unusually small size of the string section in Meiningen, and expressed no pleasure at the circumstance – something we know from a wry comment in a letter to Wüllner. Brahms was even more specific about his wishes for the Fourth Symphony in a letter to Julius Spengel. Arranging for the performance he would conduct in Hamburg on 9 April 1886, Brahms wrote: “Score and parts won’t arrive until I bring them. Instruments out of the ordinary (*apart from very many, proficient violins*) 3 timpani, triangle, 3 trombones, contrabassoon” (my emphasis). (Avins 2003, 18-19)

Avins presents a compelling case to refute Norrington and astutely remarks that “there is a strong case to be made that Brahms prized the Meiningen Orchestra in spite of, not because of, its small size.” She also addresses the notion that the smaller halls of the time were somehow related to the size of the orchestra Brahms preferred:

Indeed, while we have nothing that suggests that Brahms actually preferred small orchestras, there are many hints in the correspondence which imply that, in general, Brahms preferred small concert halls. An explicit passage occurs in a letter to Franz Wüllner, successor to Hiller as conductor of Cologne's Gürzenich Concerts. The letter was written while the composer was on tour with the Meiningen Orchestra and his Fourth Symphony. Brahms wrote to Wüllner to invite him to a performance preceding the one scheduled later in Cologne: ‘I would even like it if you could hear my piece

³⁵ Avins references Sir Charles Mackerras's complete Brahms Symphonies and Norrington's *Ein Deutsches Requiem* as examples. She adds: “I hasten to add that I own and enjoy both of these recordings, and have no intent to criticize the performances on musical grounds. The small size of the string section for the symphony cycle is only one among many other more interesting features of Mackerras's performance” (Avins 2003, 41).

twice – so that I could hear a thing or two from you. Besides, our orchestra is better suited to Elberfeld than in your large Gürzenich.’

The Gürzenich concerts took place in a building of the same name, a large, Renaissance building completed in 1452 as a dance and banquet hall, thoroughly renovated in 1857 for use as a concert hall. It was one of the largest and most imposing concert spaces in Germany, but its acoustics were not uniformly good. It should not surprise us that Brahms had reservations about asking Wüllner to hear his symphony there for the first time, where the small Meiningen Orchestra would be a poor match for the large hall with problematic acoustical properties. (Avin 2003, 18)

CHAPTER 5
EXPRESSIVE CONCEPTS
IN THE D MINOR PIANO CONCERTO

The solo part of the concerto requires great finger dexterity, power, stamina, and a wide variety of touch. But if the goal is to get close to the mind and heart of Brahms, then perhaps the best course of action is to approach the technical challenges much like we know Brahms would have: as a means to a greater end. The larger difficulties of the concerto lie in the need for the soloist and orchestra to render the forty-five minute work of music in a manner that is cohesive and meaningful. This requires a keen sense of musical structuring and organization from both parties.

One need not look further than the orchestral exposition of the first movement to see the need for well-planned structuring. The first measure of the movement is a prime example of intentional harmonic misdirection on Brahms's part. While the timpani roll and un-harmonized D in the orchestra seems to be setting up a conventional orchestral exposition in the home key, the violins' VI^{6/5} harmonic outline in the proceeding measures takes the music in an entirely different direction and reveals the tonic D to be nothing more than a pedal point around which the initial thematic material is introduced. As the first ten measures of the concerto progress, the harmonic direction begins to resemble E \flat more than D minor. Throughout the rest of the opening, Brahms manages to avoid the tonic until the introduction of the second theme (although even here he voices it in second inversion rather than in root position, further delaying a firm arrival on the tonic). It is not until m. 82 of the orchestral introduction (approximately three minutes

into the movement) that he finally gives us D (in major, thus delaying the home key in minor even further) in root position. What is truly special about this opening is that D minor is not heard in root position until the first entrance of the piano, marked with a *piano* dynamic. And so, the furor of the mighty timpani roll in the first measure that is characteristic of the tumult that is usually associated with the key of D minor, proves for naught, and instead, the home key is presented for the first time lyrically. Though the use of an orchestral exposition was still commonplace at the time, the unusual harmonic movement of this introduction calls on the orchestra to pace its emotional trajectory with great care.

Tempo, Meter, and Flexibility

The concerto is unusual amongst the works of Brahms for its inclusion of a metronome marking for the first movement. Sherman notes that there are forty-four metronome markings in only eight works of Brahms, who was quoted as saying, “I think here as well as with all other music the metronome is of no value. . .As far at least as my experience goes, everybody has, sooner or later, withdrawn his metronome marks.” As for his own markings, he said, “Good friends have talked me into putting them there, for I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together” (Musgrave 2003, 99).

Despite Brahms’s insistence to the contrary, the inclusion of a metronome marking is especially helpful in a movement that is problematic from a tempo standpoint.

The metronome marking given by Brahms indicates $\text{♩}=58$, a rather brisk tempo compared to what we are used to hearing.³⁶ Ian Pong comments on this tempo,

In Brahms's days, tempi chosen must have been, ironically, rather faster than they are in the fast-paced modern days. If we consider the tempo $\text{MM}=58$, it would theoretically give the 485 bars (there are only 484 bars in the piece, but two have a time signature of 9/4 instead of 6/4) of the first movement a duration of well under 17 minutes. This is remarkable in that even if we add 30% to this timing to account for agogics, rubato, etc., it will still be considerably faster than many recordings one can find today. In fact, the ducal orchestra of Meiningen, with which Brahms had worked closely, was known to have given concerts with programmes such as Beethoven's *Leonora Overture no. 3* and the seventh symphony, together with Brahms's first piano concerto and second symphony – all in a single evening. This would have been a pretty long evening if they were played at the tempi common nowadays! (Pong 2011)

Another contributing factor to the tempo dilemma is the *Maestoso* marking. That the movement is supposed to be performed in a majestic manner leaves some ambiguity as to the actual tempo.³⁷

The metronome marking itself is not necessarily as much an indicator of how Brahms may have wanted the movement to be performed as much as it may have been a cautionary action intended to ensure that the movement never dragged. A principal dilemma in the first movement that every performer must solve is whether the movement

³⁶ The metronome marking of this movement very rarely makes it into published editions and was added “most likely for performance purposes” to the autograph which was used as a conductor's score (Sherman 3).

³⁷ As *Maestoso* was more of a descriptive than tempo indication at this time, it was not unusual to see a composer use it in conjunction with a more conventional tempo marking. One example of this is the first movement of Chopin's E Minor Piano Concerto, which is marked *Allegro Maestoso*.

is to be thought of in a fast six or slow two. On this topic, pianist Stephen Kovacevich recalls, “When I was a kid, I played the [First Piano Concerto] under Sir Adrian Boult. He had a friend who had played it under Brahms’s baton and although he didn’t remember anything about the tempo, he did recall that Brahms beat the first, the third, the fourth and the sixth beats” (Musgrave 2003, 6). In *How Different Was Brahms’s Playing Style From Our Own*, Sherman recalls the comments of Charles Villiers Stanford, the friend in Kovacevich’s story, on the matter of conducting the first movement:

Brahms’s conducting of the D minor Concerto threw an entirely new light on the composition, especially as regards the rhythmical swing of the first movement. Written in the troublesome tempo of 6/4, most conductors either take it too quickly by beating two in a bar or too slowly by beating six. [Kovacevich commented that ‘two gives you almost no control over flexibility’.] Brahms beat it in an uneven four...which entirely did away with undue dragging or hurrying and kept the line of the movement insistent up to the last note.’ (Musgrave 2003, 6)

The description of Brahms sub-dividing the last half of each measure, but at least referring somewhat to the idea of the tempo in 2 suggests that he was seeking to avoid extra propulsion on the back half of beats while also ensuring that the tempo never stagnated. Pong says of Brahms’s sub-divisions, “this beating would agree with a slow-feeling compound duple and give [the tempo] a good deal of lilt. Indeed, in a letter to Clara Schumann, Brahms described the first movement’s 6/4 as ‘slow’. It is not hard to imagine that, for the same tempo to be beaten in six, it would feel uncomfortably fast” (Pong 2011).

The question of tempo in the first movement of the concerto has become somewhat anecdotal over time, bringing about one of the more infamous moments in classical music performance history, when Leonard Bernstein walked on stage in New

York and delivered a cautionary prologue to his April 6, 1962 performance of the piece with piano soloist Glenn Gould, whose tempi he could not bring himself to agree with. In describing the experience to interviewer Jonathan Cott, Bernstein touched on one of the chief dangers regarding the tempo in this movement and its relation to the rest of the concerto, “the trouble was that we had to play the entire first movement in six instead of in two [*sings methodically: ‘one-two-three-four-five-six’*] – that’s one bar. Then [*sings: ‘dum-dah’*] – that’s two bars. It was just unbearable! And then the second movement was in...guess what? Six! A slow six...so that there was in fact *no slow movement*” (Cott 104).³⁸ Because the first and second movements are both in 6/4, performers run the unusual risk of the first two movements sounding exactly identical in pulse to one another. Though the movements are diametrically opposed to one another as far as character and intensity, any music that stays largely in one tempo for thirty minutes might easily fatigue listeners.

Another issue that plagues both the first and second movements as a result of their expansive 6/4 meters is the ability of the woodwinds and brass to sustain their sound over

³⁸ Present-day listeners of the now legendary recording of this concert often times find themselves perplexed at the notion that the tempi are slow enough to merit a pre-concert speech. In fact, the tempi in this radio broadcast recording, while still on the slower side, are nothing out of the ordinary in relation to other performances that are now regarded as conventional or “normal,” perhaps due to Gould’s influence. Bernstein explains that the speech was concocted for the previous night’s performance by both Gould and Bernstein together to prepare the audience for what was to come and to ensure that they wouldn’t leave in the middle of the piece, which lasted a little under an hour and a half. Bernstein also explains that by the day of the recorded performance, Gould had recognized that his tempi the night before “had been a little ungainly,” and although they never actually discussed taking quicker tempi, the next day’s concert did see a remarkable thirty-five minutes shaved off of the previous night’s performance time. (Cott 2013, 106)

long phrases. The first movement features several important horn solos in sections that are rather tranquil, meaning that the music will most likely be operating at the lower end of the tempo spectrum. Bernstein was well aware of this issue in relation to Glenn Gould's slow tempo choices, pleading with Gould, "The orchestra can't play that. The horns don't have enough breath to play even one *phrase* at that tempo" (Cott 104). Indeed, at almost any tempo, the beats are fairly wide, and so in a moderate six, the phrasing of the winds will start to deteriorate due to lack of air. Conversely, there are certain technical challenges in the solo part that cannot be surmounted at an exceedingly fast tempo and some lyrical passages that need a certain amount of spaciousness to be phrased beautifully. Though the accounts of Brahms's conducting don't elaborate enough to recall his conducting for the entirety of the movement, it is hard to imagine that he would not have slipped into a six beat pattern at certain points or a two beat pattern at others.

The second movement suffers even more from the issue of overly broad beats, as the *Adagio* tempo indication leaves no room for the kind of debate allowed in the first. Common sense dictates that conductors will choose to err on the side of caution and adopt a quicker tempo for the second movement in order to help the winds sustain their long lines. This risks further blurring the lines between the first and second movement tempi. Of course, the taking a faster approach to the second movement isn't without its problems as well. The solo part is rich with counterpoint – sinuous melodies and countermelodies and devastatingly beautiful suspensions that predict the most touching of harmonies – that risks being obscured if too quickly played. In addition, the sprawling meter of the movement foreshadows music that develops slowly with a large emotional

peak in the middle. If the tempo is rushed, the soloist's phrasing runs the risk of sounding robotic and the structuring of the movement haphazard. To find the solution to these problems, it helps to go back to Brahms's approach to tempo in the first movement. His idea of sub-dividing the measure in such a fashion ultimately results in a wide berth of flexibility. Flexibility in turn, ensures that performers are never locked into one tempo that stagnates over time. The concept of such flexibility also works very effectively in the second movement due in large part to the fact that several of the first piano entrances being accompanied to varying degrees. The soloist is responsible for making sure the rubato within the solo sections finds its way back to the original tempo, fusing the sections together. In other cases, the soloist can make use of *ritenutos* to dovetail the end of one piano episode with the beginning of the next orchestral interlude. In Example 4, the solo piano textures thicken and the *crescendo* heightens the sense of tension, as do the syncopated figures in the left hand. This permits the soloist to generate momentum into the woodwind entrances, thereby establishing a tempo which is suitable for the sustained woodwind writing that follows at rehearsal marker "A".

Example 4. Mvt. 2, mm. 40-45 (Rieter-Biedermann 1873, 26).

The image shows a musical score for piano and clarinet. The first system (mm. 40-42) is for piano, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The second system (mm. 43-45) includes a clarinet part (Clar.) in the treble clef and a piano part (p) in the bass clef. Performance markings include 'fzsc.' above the first system, 'dimin.' above the second system, and 'p' below the piano part in the second system.

Example 5 demonstrates a passage in which the soloist may opt to *ritard.* and close out the phrase allowing the conductor license to restore the tempo to a pace he or she finds appropriate for the next orchestral interlude.

Example 5. Mvt. 2, mm. 12-18 (Rieter-Biedermann 1873, 24).

The image displays a musical score for a piano solo. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system begins with a 'Solo.' instruction above the treble staff and 'molto dolce espressivo' below the bass staff. The second system features 'cresc.' and 'dimin.' markings above the treble staff and a 'p' marking below the bass staff. The music is written in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature.

Good communication on the part of the soloist and conductor ensures that the pianist will get to revel in the beauty of keyboard writing and the conductor will be able to evoke consistent phrasing from the wind section, especially in the clarinet and oboe solos of the development of the movement.

The third movement does not present the same kind of tempo challenges as the first two. *Allegro non Troppo* is a standard tempo indication for Brahms, and in the 2/4 meter implies a brisk tempo, but one that does not go overboard with forward momentum. What is perhaps even more important in this movement than the mathematics of tempi is the strong grounding of the syncopated rhythm in the main theme. The destabilization of the rustic qualities of that rhythm can easily make a slow tempo feel too fast and a fast tempo feel out of control.

Brahms's subdivision of beats in the first movement and the tendency of his metronome markings to fall on the faster side of average could be indicative of a larger desire to avoid any excess musical rumination. However, as is the case with a lot of his music, there are other practical factors that need to be considered as well. In work such as the concerto, it is not necessarily a matter of strict adherence to one tempo, but rather the ability of the soloist and orchestra to form a symbiotic relationship.

Articulation

The way Brahms's articulation markings are to be considered and executed is one of the few elements that is not subject to a fair amount of ambiguity. In the concerto, Brahms goes to great lengths to account for the proper articulation of every idea, and as evidenced and explained in the 2010 Edition Peters publication of the concerto, even went through the trouble of inventing his own articulations where he felt the string writing called for it. Example 6 demonstrates the aforementioned *strichpunktke* from Gerdes's critical commentary (Edition Peters 3, 2010).

Example 6. Mvt. 1, mm. 62-68. Brahms is careful to differentiate between *staccato* and the upright dashes in both the string and woodwind writing. This articulation could be considered akin to the duration and release of a *tenuto* (Brahms, 1858, 11).

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for Example 6, Mvt. 1, measures 62-68. The score is written on ten staves, with the top two staves likely representing woodwinds and the bottom six representing strings. The notation is dense and includes various articulation marks such as slurs, accents, and slanted dashes. The word "staccato" is written above several notes in the lower staves. The manuscript is in black ink on aged paper, with some corrections and erasures visible. The page number "62" is written at the bottom center.

One of the important distinctions to make is the difference between phrasing slurs and articulation slurs. Though this is a concept that pertains more to string players, as the slurring is tied directly to their bowings, Brahms is very conscious in the concerto to utilize slurring in both the macro and micro sense. We see this occur in the recapitulation of the first movement (Example 7).³⁹

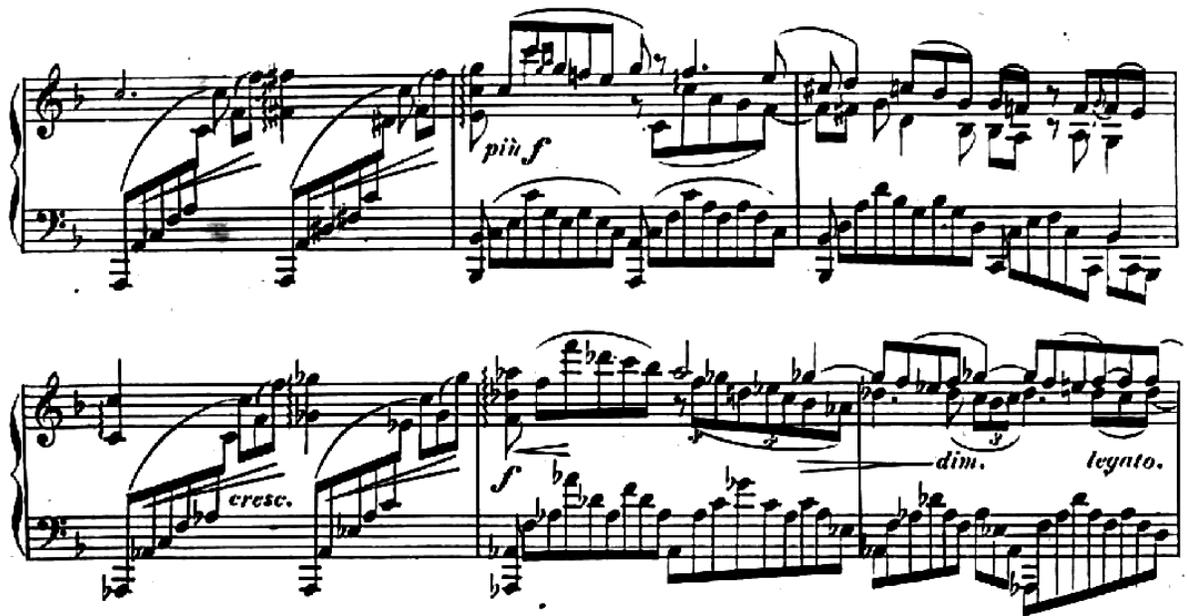
Example 7. Mvt. 1, mm. 355-365 (Rieter-Biedermann 1873, 17).



³⁹ The slurring for this particular section is inconsistent over various editions. In his autograph, Brahms gives the above phrasing slurs for only the first large grouping and none of the rest. The assumption is that the rest of the slurs are implied. However, Brahms's two-piano manuscript does indeed include the slurrings throughout as do the Rieter-Biedermann editions. In addition, Brahms's four-hand arrangement also has the slurring in the corresponding section in the exposition (first solo entrance).

Here Brahms uses longer slurs to indicate the phrasing of various groupings, switching between the half bar and whole bar, and using two note slurs to indicate actual articulation. Brahms also makes use of slurs to indicate the primary voice in highly contrapuntal passages such as Example 8.

Example 8. Mvt. 1, mm. 201-206 (Rieter-Biedermann 1873, 11).



The image displays a musical score for Example 8, Mvt. 1, mm. 201-206. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the piano part (left) and the violin part (right). The piano part features a complex texture with many slurs and articulation marks. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and dynamics like *piu f*. The second system continues the piano part with dynamics like *cresc.* and *f*, and the violin part with dynamics like *dim.* and *legato.*

Here Brahms moves the slurs from the soprano to the alto voice parallel with his voicing of the melodic line. While most pianists probably wouldn't need such help figuring out which notes to voice out, what Brahms's marking of this does is give visual reinforcement to the direction of the line, and compels the soloist to consider this section as more of an operatic duet rather than simply intricate counterpoint. Another interesting use of slurs that we see in the concerto is to indicate a breath in a phrase, much like a singer would interpret the end of a long slur or some sort of punctuation in the text:

Example 9. Mvt. 2, mm. 40-45. Measures 42-43 demonstrate Brahms's use of slurs to dictate timing and punctuate the phrase (Rieter-Biedermann 1873, 26).

The image shows a musical score for two staves, likely piano and violin/viola. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The score includes dynamic markings: *resc.* (ritardando) above the top staff in measure 42, *dimin.* (diminuendo) above the top staff in measure 43, and *p* (piano) below the bottom staff in measure 43. There are also slurs over note groups in both hands across measures 42 and 43. A triangle symbol is present above the top staff in measure 43.

In this example we see Brahms slurring over bar-lines and over note groups, almost compelling a breath mark before the G# in the right hand of m. 43. Meanwhile, the left hand is slurred in a way that suggests phrasing by the harmony change and gives an undulating pulse to the entire phrase. The final notable use of slurs in the concerto occurs after almost every piano statement of the main theme (Example 10).

Example 10. Mvt. 3, mm. 23-28 (Rieter-Biedermann 1873, 32).

The image shows a musical score for two staves, likely piano and violin/viola. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The score features a complex rhythmic pattern with many slurs over note groups in both hands across measures 23-28.

Here we find one of the more difficult passages to coordinate between piano and orchestra. The slurs create impulses on off beats shifting the perception of the downbeat by a sixteenth note. This use of slurs is quite different than the other ones mentioned, as its primary function is not phrasing, but rather to destabilize the perception of meter through articulation.

Whereas the slurring is a primary highlight of the solo part in this concerto, one of the more interesting sections pertaining to articulation occurs in the orchestral fugue of the third movement (Example 11). What makes this particular section so remarkable is Brahms's distribution of the same articulation through the various sections of the orchestra. The result is a unique blend of articulations with each instrument executing the staccato markings and slurs in a way that is idiomatic of their specific instrument. It is one of the only spots in the whole concerto where the texture of articulation is not uniform throughout the orchestra.

majority of his life, with even the later ones having a clearer sound than the modern pianos of today, one can imagine he relished the opportunity to specify exact touches and textures in this concerto.

Pedaling

The first part of the 19th century, namely the period of time that included the end of the classical and beginning of the romantic era ushered in a newfound emphasis on the variation of color and texture in conjunction with the evolution of the piano and the technical feats that their innovations made possible. Long before Liszt, Beethoven had demonstrated an infatuation with the use of pedal with his rather idiosyncratic “*con sordino*” and “*senza sordino*” indications.⁴⁰ Sandra Rosenblum points out that the advent of the damper pedal facilitated the spreading out of accompanimental left-hand figures and that a new focus on creative pedaling “allowed the piano to sing when the dampers remained up” (Rosenblum 1993, 164). Rosenblum also notes that it was customary for composers in the early part of the romantic era, such as Mendelssohn and Schumann to simply use the phrase “*col ped*” to indicate in more general terms that a work or specific

⁴⁰ Beethoven’s use of the word “*sordino*” is somewhat strange in the modern context as the immediate translation is “mute”. However, what Beethoven is referring to is actually the dampers of the fortepiano, so the modifier “*con*” indicates no pedal or a pedal change whereas “*senza*” indicates the use of pedal. Beethoven uses these markings somewhat notoriously in the slow movements of his Moonlight Sonata and Third Piano Concerto, where he indicates that those movements should be played without the dampers active throughout, or in modern terms, in one long pedal. While this seems strange and again, counterintuitive, it is not totally out of the realm of possibility when considering that the fortepianos and especially their damper pedals were far weaker than those we are now accustomed to on our modern instruments.

passage was to be pedaled, leaving the majority of the decision making to the performer, although she is also quick to include that Schumann considered the use of the pedal to be “one of the most essential and characteristic ways in which the piano expresses itself” (Rosenblum 1993, 165). Although by the time Brahms wrote the concerto, the art of pedaling had already been developed into an art-form unto itself with Chopin and Liszt reinventing the possibilities of pianism with their ingenious use of the pedal, the technique of pedaling was still evolving. Rosenblum writes that as late as 1875 and 1876, the concept of pedaling after the attack of a certain note or harmonic change, better known as syncopated pedaling, was still regarded as an innovative and ingenious implementation (Rosenblum 1993, 167). Chopin was and is arguably still the most over-zealous in his indication of pedaling, though by all accounts he was incredibly conscientious about clear and precise changes, his foot being described as “literally vibrating” (Rosenblum 1993, 167).

Brahms, in keeping with his old-school ways, made sparing use of pedal markings.⁴¹ Peres Da Costa explains the reason for this:

In the second half of the 19th century the damper and the *una corda* pedals became standard on grand pianos, but their use, particularly the damper pedal continued to be experimental. Most composers of the era, Brahms included, did not feel a need to notate pedal use in any systematic way, and

⁴¹ One has to wonder how much of his reverence of Beethoven and work editing the works of Chopin affected Brahms’s usage and marking of the damper pedal. While he was certainly not as frequent with his markings as those two composers, there was an element of creativity in how he used pedal when he did specifically call for it. In that regard, it is hard to imagine that he was wholly un-impacted by his time spent examining the works of Beethoven and Chopin. Furthermore, being that he was an avid musicologist, it is also difficult to fathom Brahms being unaware of Beethoven’s and Chopin’s use of pedal.

often where they did it was to create a specific effect, leaving its general use to the whim and taste of the performer....

Like many other composers of the era, Brahms left the use of the damper pedal largely to the taste of performers, presumably expecting that they would take special care of his peculiar compositional style, his penchant for cross rhythms and characteristically thick chordal textures. (Peres Da Costa, Brown, Wadsworth 22)

In both the D minor and B flat concerti, Brahms shows a tendency to indicate pedal markings specifically in passages that feature a pedal point of some kind, or in some cases, the sustaining of a single chord over top of a phrase or run that outlines the harmony. If the idea is that Brahms's markings are lenient and demonstrate a good-faith approach to a performer's ability to change pedal cleanly, he seems less inclined to leave passages in which he expressly wants no pedal changes to chance.

Brahms's reluctance to over-mark pedaling does not prevent him from marking spots in which he desires the use of pedal for very specific purposes. An example of this occurs in the second movement of the concerto. In m. 29 (Example 12) and m. 33, instead of merely calling for the depression of the damper pedal, he writes "*legato ped*", a clear indication that Brahms did not see the damper pedal as simply a color tool, but also explicitly wanted it used to ensure a *legatissimo* touch.⁴² Throughout the rest of the movement, he simply employs the marking "*legato*" under the left-hand line and the

⁴² Further necessitating the use of a good edition, this unique pedal marking appears in some shape or another in all of the major editions. The notable exception is the Schirmer edition in which the editor, Edwin Hughes, offers the *legato* indication but omits the pedal indication in favor of his own suggested changes. While on its face, the idea of indicating changes to ensure textural clarity is seemingly common (although Hughes's idea of changing pedal on every half-note instead of quarter is curious in itself), the exclusion of the pedal marking denies the *legato* marking its proper context and gives it the appearance of a suggestion rather than the technical application that "*legato ped*" is.

soloist is left to interpret that as further indication of his desire for the same kind of pedaling. It is interesting to note that the left-hand writing in which Brahms wants a *legato* pedal is also an example of the aforementioned tendency to consciously call for the use of pedal in passages that function over a pedal point as in Example 12. While Brahms does not necessarily want a single pedal to enhance the suspension of the E over the rest of the passage, which is highly chromatic, this section is an fascinating if not serendipitous intersection of the instances in which he deems the marking of pedal necessary.

Example 12. Mvt. 2, mm. 29-30 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 46).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, specifically measures 29-30 of the second movement. The score is written for the left hand on a grand staff. The right hand part features a melodic line with two triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above the notes) and a long slur. The left hand part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The dynamic marking is *dolce pp* (pianissimo dolce). Below the left hand part, the instruction *legato Ped.* is written, indicating the use of the damper pedal to achieve a seamless legato effect. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 3/4.

Brahms’s use of the damper pedal to achieve a seamless *legato* in this section does not preclude the soloist from using it for dual purposes. The “*pianissimo dolce*” designation suggests that a special sound quality is desired and the damper pedal can be used in conjunction with a light finger touch to produce a translucent, ethereal, and otherworldly texture which provides an effective contrast to the thickness of the chorale-like opening and the overt lyricism of the more developmental middle section. Furthermore, this sort

of indication shows that while Brahms did not see the need to indicate every small pedal change, he was aware of the effects that could be achieved with a more specific marking here and there.

Being that Brahms left issues of pedaling to the discretion of the performer, decision making as far as pedaling in the concerto goes hand in hand with the intricacy of articulation. The first movement, with its bevy of two note slurs in the first entrance, ensuing chromaticism and thick textures, forces the soloist to constantly clear the damper pedal for fear of blurring dissonant harmonies together. The frequent chromaticism of the solo part also calls for a judicious evaluation of the depth to which the damper pedal is depressed. The use of half-pedal in these instances, as opposed to full depression, helps ensure that changes are quicker and cleaner. In the first movements there are moments that force the soloist to interpret the music from the standpoint of damper pedal application. One of these is the piano's restatement of the horn motif in the exposition and its subsequent appearance in the recapitulation (Example 13):

Example 13. Mvt. 1, mm. 165-171 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 12).

The musical score for Example 13, Mvt. 1, mm. 165-171, is presented in three systems. The first system (mm. 165-167) is marked *p dolce* and features a sixteenth-note melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system (mm. 168-169) is marked *cresc.* and continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system (mm. 170-171) is marked *f* and concludes the passage with a final chord in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Though the harmonic changes occur every half-measure, applying too much damper pedal runs the risk of obscuring the articulation in the top voice and thickening the texture to the point where the inner voices no longer have the requisite clarity and balance, but rather distort the entire sound. Conversely, there are spots in the concerto where the full depression of the damper pedal can create a wall of sound that strongly evokes that of the organ such as the climax of the second movement (Example 14).

Example 14. Mvt. 2, mm. 77-81 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 51).

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with two staves (I and II). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (mm. 77-79) shows the piano (I) with a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, marked with a forte (ff) dynamic. The piano (II) part consists of sustained chords and a few moving notes. The second system (mm. 80-81) features the piano (I) with a melodic line and trills, and the piano (II) with a bass line. The third system (mm. 81) continues the piano (I) melodic line and the piano (II) bass line. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics, articulation marks, and phrasing slurs.

The use of full pedal, even throughout the trills (one may even argue *especially* throughout the trills), contributes to this organ-like mass of sound, and when combined with the power of the orchestration, makes for a very powerful moment.

The use of the *una corda* pedal in the concerto is one that is reserved only for the most special of cases. Peres Da Costa writes,

Throughout the 19th century the use of the *una corda* pedal was appropriate whenever the dynamic indicated was *pp* or softer or the mood required a special sound would perhaps indicated by the term *dolce* or *espressivo* or both...Brahms explains: 'The frequent use of the *una corda* pedal...is left to the judgement of the pianist.' (Peres Da Costa, Brown, Wadsworth 26)⁴³

There are two spots in the concerto that benefit from the color change provided by the *una corda*. The first one is in the development of the first movement (Example 15).

⁴³ The quote from Brahms is actually an annotation in the piano part of the second movement of his G minor piano quartet. As Peres Da Costa explains, "Brahms's marking is *molto p dolce ed espress.* with the added instructions to use the *una corda*" (26).

Example 15. Mvt. 1, mm. 261-277. Demonstration of *una corda* pedal as a coloring device. (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 22)

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with two staves labeled I and II. The first system (mm. 261-266) is marked "Solo" and "p espress.". The second system (mm. 267-272) is marked "dim.". The third system (mm. 273-277) is marked "pp". The score features complex harmonic textures with many accidentals and dynamic markings.

Though it is only marked *p espressivo*, we have a rare instance of total clarity where Brahms does not harmonize anything in the piano writing. This, combined with the ascending register and seemingly diminishing dynamics (despite the phrasing hairpins in several spots), makes it an ideal place to make use of the *una corda*. The second section (Example 16) is at the end of the second movement where Brahms takes a motif that has already been stated three times and weaves it up into the highest register of the piano, marking it *pp molto espressivo e legato*:

Example 16. Mvt. 2, mm. 89-94 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 53).

The musical score for Example 16 consists of two systems of piano parts. The first system covers measures 89 to 91. The right hand (RH) begins with a melodic line in measure 89, marked *pp*. In measure 90, it features an 8-measure phrase and a 3-measure triplet, with the instruction *pp molto espress. e legato*. The left hand (LH) provides harmonic support with chords. The second system covers measures 92 to 94. The RH continues the melodic line, reaching a higher register, and includes a trill in measure 94. The LH continues with chords. The score is marked *Tutti* at the beginning and *pp* in several places.

The use of pedal in the concerto must also be viewed in the context of the instruments that Brahms had at his disposal. His willingness to employ long stretches of damper pedal over various harmonic suspensions or pedal points probably had to do in large part with the clarity and wide array of textural possibilities the Graf piano he wrote the concerto on was capable of. In addition, his trust in the performer was probably also spurred on by the forgiving nature of the smaller sound that instrument produced. It is not out of the realm of possibility to think that if Brahms had access to the Steinways and Bechsteins which he came to love for the concerti, that he may have taken a more careful and more practical approach towards ensuring clarity of pedaling. As it stands now, the application of pedal in the concerto, much like many other elements of the music-making process, must be adjusted to compensate for the greatly increased power of modern instruments. While some details of the technical approach to the work must be diminished in order to maintain the clarity Brahms surely intended, others, such as the use of the *una corda* pedal or sharpness of articulation can and should be enhanced in order to provide a rendering of the work which comes as close to what Brahms's original intentions were.

Trills

One of the important motifs in the concerto is Brahms's use of trills. Throughout each movement, the trills serve a variety of purposes while at the same time posing a myriad of technical problems. The thunderous octave trills in the first theme of the opening movement are a prime example of this (Example 17).

Example 17. Mvt. 1, mm. 110-113 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 7).



This motivic sequence of trills requires the performer to either have strong fourth and fifth fingers, large hands, or devise a workaround that does not diminish the impact and aesthetic of the original writing. Furthermore, as the orchestra first introduces this motif, the soloist is obliged to replicate its phrasing, making this already unnatural writing even more uncomfortable.

In the second movement, Brahms makes use of trills in two different fashions. The first is the low rumbling of the octave trills (this time written for two hands) in the climax of the movement (Example 18). These trills and the arpeggiations that emanate from them are an effective device when combined with the rather transparent, woodwind-heavy, orchestral textures.

Example 18. Mvt. 2, mm. 77-81 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 51).

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with two staves (I and II). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (mm. 77-79) shows a complex texture with multiple voices in both hands, including a prominent bass line and a treble line with many sixteenth notes. The second system (mm. 80-81) shows a change in texture with a more melodic bass line and a treble line featuring a series of slurs over sixteenth-note patterns. The third system (mm. 81) continues the melodic development in the bass line and the sixteenth-note patterns in the treble line. Dynamics include 'ff' (fortissimo) and 'tr' (trills). A 'C' in a box indicates a common time signature change.

The second type of trill, found at the end of the movement (Example 19), serves as the crux of a V-I harmonic progression, the typical harmonic function of a concerto cadenza. The trills ultimately operate as an elaborate extension of the V-I progression, a technique not unlike those used by Beethoven at the end of the second movements of his piano concerti.

Example 19. Mvt. 2, m. 95 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 54)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano and violin. The first system, starting at measure 95, is marked *pp* and *Cadanza ad lib.* It shows a trill in the violin part. The second system continues the cadenza with trills in both the piano and violin. The third system is marked *molto Adagio* and includes a trill in the violin, a *tr. dim.* marking, and a *Tutti* section starting with *pp*.

The third movement immediately makes use of the trill as an expressive device, embellishing a melody note (Example 20). It is important to note that in this case, the trill

must start from the note as opposed to from above in order to preserve the integrity of the thematic material.

Example 20. Mvt. 3, mm. 1-8 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 55).

Rondo
Allegro non troppo
Solo

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef and a bass clef. The second system also has a treble clef and a bass clef. The music is in 2/4 time and D minor. The tempo is 'Allegro non troppo'. The piece is marked 'Solo' and 'I'. There are trills in the right hand of the piano in both systems. The first system ends with a trill on the note G4. The second system starts with a trill on the note G4. The second system ends with a trill on the note G4. The score is marked 'I' and '5'.

The last section featuring a trills in a significant role is at the end of the cadenza, which transitions the third movement from D minor to D major. In this section Brahms uses the trills to weave a counter-melody over a series of harmonic progressions which subtly make the minor to major modulation (Example 21).

Example 21. Mvt. 3, mm. 394-403 (Breitkopf & Härtel 1965, 79).

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled 'I', covers measures 394 to 403. It begins with a trill in the right hand, followed by a forte (f) section and a piano (p) legato section. The second system, also labeled 'I', covers measures 398 to 403. It features a crescendo (cresc.) section, a ritardando (rit.) section, and a section with a five-measure rest (5-) and a triplet (3).

The use of trills as a motivic force in the concerto gives the approximately forty-minute long work a major unifying feature. When considered within the whole of the work, trills become a vital, recurring element of the music, binding together much of the thematic and harmonic material running throughout each movement.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to wonder what Brahms would think of the kind of attention his music is receiving these days, especially since much of the attention is coming from those who, like Michael Musgrave, Styra Avins, and Roger Norrington are working diligently and earnestly to bring performance of Brahms's music back as close to his realm as the information they uncover allows them. Brahms, being such a staunch devotee of studying renaissance and baroque music and being responsible for bringing much of that relatively unknown music to the concert halls of Germany and Austria, would surely appreciate the effort to render his music as faithfully as possible. Or perhaps, knowing the contrarian streak in him, one could imagine him dismissing the idea of fussing over him while secretly relishing the adulation and attention. No matter what his presumed reaction would be, the move in recent decades to take a serious look at his music in the context of his personal life, the times and society he lived in, and his musical proclivities is an important one. Brahms was the keeper of the keys for the traditional classicists, a mantle he inherited after Robert Schumann's death. What makes it all the more interesting is that what unfolds is a portrait of a man who slowly transformed from an abrasive twenty-something to an introverted recluse; someone who was for most of his life an unrelenting agnostic, yet had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the King James Bible, which he kept by his bedside; someone who was able to write the most peaceful and serene music in the face of unspeakable sadness and tragedy but was scarcely able to control his temper at times; someone who professed an undying commitment to being faithful to a score, yet allowed interpreters of his music the creative freedom to bring it to life. If the

study of performance practice involves a significant amount of reconciling paradoxes and various dichotomous principles, then Brahms is the ultimate study.

The concerto is a vital study in itself, as the events that surround every part of its genesis all somehow shaped the rest of Brahms's life. It is indisputable that the completion of this concerto gave him the audacity to finally complete a symphony and that the disastrous Leipzig premiere of the concerto surely impacted the kind of music he felt he needed to write moving forward. The concerto lies at the crux of Brahms's life in a very real way. It was his coming of age, prompted by the loss of his friend and mentor and the deep romantic love he had for Schumann's widow. The concerto also signaled a darkening in his music, as the light youthful nature of his earlier works seemed to dissolve into the fury of the first movement and never quite re-emerge. Of course, Brahms's last works were more peaceful, but it was a peace that Brahms found toward the end of his life. The concerto launched Brahms's music into a state of tumult, and what resulted over the course of the next forty or so years, was some of the most honest and tragic music that had ever been written. As Adolf Schubring writes, "In the concerto for Piano and Orchestra, op. 15, Brahms draws himself up to his full height before our very eyes" (Frisch 210). Donald Francis Tovey offers perhaps the most poignant assessment of the piece:

With this work the genius of Brahms shook itself free alike from formalism and vagueness...The final result was inevitably a classical concerto, but one of unprecedented tragic power. There is no vestige of immaturity or inconsistency in the style and form. The storm of disapproval which greeted its first performance at Leipzig had origins of partisan opposition...But all this tale of storm and stress must be mentioned in order to guard ourselves against letting it at this time of day lead us to think that what is still unfamiliar in the work immature. Brahms attained maturity in it at every point; and neither in performance nor in listening can we afford to shirk its

difficulties as if they were crudities with no artistic justification. (Tovey 1981, 115)

If the concerto is a work of full-fledged maturity, then perhaps this recollection from Brahms's friend Richard Barth sums up our responsibility to uphold the traditions that Brahms set forth in his music-making and compositions:

If Brahms came,...it gave us great joy to see, how gladly and with what fiery zeal he made music with us. Once he even studied his F major String Quintet, which was still too new to us, in the greatest detail with us for hours, and on this occasion I was able to learn more than ever before how Brahms conceived his music and wanted to have it performed. He demanded a combination of the sharpest rhythmical playing with a free and natural style of performance, which, however, was never allowed to degenerate into arbitrariness; the unity of the tempo could never be questioned so that all prominent expansion or acceleration in places where it was not indicated had to be avoided. He wanted to know that all markings were scrupulously followed. If one knows Brahms's nature, one has to admit that probably no composer marked things as precisely as he, and that, for those who understand how to read it, everything that leads to the right conception and infallibly protects from all arbitrary mawkishness is in fact indicated. (Peres Da Costa, Brown, Wadsworth 26)

Or as Brahms told his student Florence May, "It is all there."

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APPENDIX A

HISTORICAL EDITIONS

Version	Year	Publication History
Brahms's Handwritten Manuscript	1857	Rieter-Biedermann Purchased the Publishing Rights
First Edition-Solo Part	1861	Rieter-Biedermann
Brahms's Handwritten Four-Hand Reduction	1863-1864	Written at the request of Rieter-Biedermann
First Edition-Composer's Four-Hand Reduction	1864	Written at the request of and published by Rieter-Biedermann
Brahms's Handwritten Two-Piano Reduction	1873	Last completed version by the composer – generally considered to be the least trustworthy of all his revisions
First Edition-Composer's Two-Piano Reduction	1873	Written at the request of and published by Rieter-Biedermann
First Edition-Full Score	1875	Rieter-Biedermann-Published 18 years after completion and 14 years after Rieter-Biedermann's first issue of op. 15

APPENDIX B

MODERN EDITIONS

Publisher	Instrumentation	Sourcing
Breitkopf & Härtel (Hans Gal)	Full Score	Brahms collected works edition-Reprinted by Edwin Kalmus and Dover Publications- Reissued as study score (Reprinted by Dover for their study score)
Breitkopf & Härtel (Otto Singer II)	Two-Piano Reduction	Reprinted by Dover Publications
Eulenburg (Paul Badura-Skoda)	Full Score	Study Score-Catalogue No. 713- Amalgam of various sources
Edition Peters (Johannes Gerdes)	Two-Piano Reduction	Earlier of the two available Peters editions (1983)
Edition Peters (Johannes Gerdes/Paul Badura-Skoda)	Two-Piano Reduction	Later and more comprehensive of the two available Peters editions (2010)- Amalgam of various sources, using the Rieter-Biedermann solo piano and four-hand as the primary sources
Dover Publications	Brahms's Four-Hand Arrangement	Reprint of the Rieter-Biedermann first edition of this version
G. Schirmer (Edwin Hughes)	Two-Piano Reduction	Basic student edition with no sources cited

APPENDIX C

BRAHMS ORIGINAL LETTER TO JOSEPH JOACHIM AFTER LEIPZIG PREMIERE OF D MINOR CONCERTO

January 28, 1859

Dearest friend,

Still utterly intoxicated by the edifying delights presented to my eyes and ears in beholding and conversing with the sages of our music city in the course of the past several days, I force this sharp and hard steel pen of Sahr's to describe to you how it came about and was happily brought to completion, that my concerto here has been a brilliant and decisive—flop.

First of all, it really went very well, I played significantly better than in Hanover, the orchestra outstandingly.

The first rehearsal roused no emotions whatever among the musicians or the listeners.

But for the second rehearsal, no listener showed up and not one musician moved a face muscle.

In the evening, the *Elisa Overture* by Cherubini was performed, then an *Ave Maria* by the same, sung lifelessly; and so I hoped the Pfund's drumroll would come at the right time. The first movement and second were listened to without any kind of emotion. At the end, three hands attempted to fall slowly one into another, whereupon, however, a quite distant hissing from all sides forbade such demonstrations.

There is nothing further to write about this event, for nobody has said the smallest word to me about the work! Excepting David, who was very friendly and took an exceptional interest in it and took some pains over it.

Neither Rietz, nor Wenzel, Senff, Dreyschock, Grützmacher, Röntgen, made even the most irrelevant comment.

I asked Sahr for some specifics this morning, and enjoyed his candor. This flop, by the way, has made absolutely on me, and the slightly distasteful and somber mood following it faded when I heard a C major Symphony by Haydn and the Ruins of Athens. In spite of it all, the concerto will be well liked some day when I have improved its anatomy, and a second one will certainly sound different.

I believe this is the best thing that can happen to one; it forces one to collect one's thoughts appropriately and raises one's courage. I am plainly experimenting and still groping.

But the hissing was surely too much? Your letter, which I received last night in the pub, was very comforting, and I was not irritated with Herrmann etc., who were cheerfully drinking with me and said not a word about the concerto etc.

Frau Schumann is still in Vienna, as I found out here; she is someone I would have liked to have here! Concerning Enzo you probably have an answer. Greetings here have and will be taken care of.

The faces here appeared pathetically somber when I came from Hanover and was accustomed to seeing yours. Monday I am going to Hamburg. Sunday there is some interesting church music here, and in the evening *Faust*, at Frau Frege's.

Please send Hanover newspapers to me in Hamburg!

I'll write again from there. Be warmly remembered, dearest fellow! Greet Zillinger etc. etc.

Your Johannes.
(Hurriedly)⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Avins 1997, 188-190