Commentary on Intermezzo in A Major, Op.118, No: 2

By

Johannes Brahms

Deepak Edakkattil Gopinath
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Introduction

Johannes Brahms composed Intermezzo in A Major in 1893 as a part of the *Sechs Klavierstucke op.118*. Despite the brevity of these piano works, they contained lot of different techniques, which Brahms used in his larger works, such as the chromatic and contrapuntal writing that characterizes much of Brahms's music. In this paper I would like to bring a few of the most important characteristics of this piece that stood out to me as impressive.

Analysis and Observations

One of particular interest in this piece is the use of *developing variation* – a compositional technique specifically associated with Brahms. According to Arnold Schoenberg in his essay entitled *Bach* (1955), developing variation means that, the variation of the features of the basic unit produces all thematic formulations that provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity. We will look into how Brahms derives almost all of the melodic material, by applying transformations on the few basic motifs.

Brahms introduces three motives in the beginning of the piece, in m.1-2, which he would later restructure and reshape through out the remainder of the piece. The first motif (C#-B-D) is important because introduces the step-skip idea which is to be transformed in all possible ways to reinforce the overall form. The other motif (A-G#-F# descending line) is to be continued and expanded into the *Urlinie* (the fundamental melodic aspect of the fundamental structure (*Ursatz*) in Schenkerian
terminology) descent at various points in the piece. The last motif (C#-D-C#) is significant because, it brings out the *mi-fa* neighboring relationship that is to be seen later on in m.16-18 (E-F-E on C Major) and in m.20-21 (A-B-A [mi-fa] on F Major). At m. 16 where the second theme begins, the melodic material seems to be a reworking of the neighbor tone motions and the shift of registers that occur in the first four measures of the piece. In measures 24-28 the 1st motif is expanded sequentially in a rising passage, which concludes in a rising leap of a seventh from B to high A that closely resembles the leap in m.2. At this point I would like to mention Brahms’s exquisite use of sequences to bring out long-range linear connections throughout the A section of the piece and how it also helps in smoothening out modulations. Measures 30-34 functions as a quasi-interlude into the closing theme of the A. Brahms brings back the primary motif in this section, but now it is in the bass voice. At the same time, we can observe the *Urlinie* descent, which happens from A₄ till A₃, and gets repeated once again in m.32-33, but now the natural minor mode is used instead of the major mode. It is important to note that the second *Urlinie* descent never gets completed and Brahms begins the closing theme in m.35, where he brings back the primary motif in an inverted form in a higher register, thereby calling for greater attention. In the closing theme of the A section, material from both the first and second themes are brought together. From m.38 the bass starts an *Urlinie* descent, which goes all the way up to the final measures of the A, section and this reflects the similar kind of descent, which happened earlier in m.30-34. The final two measures also brings back the initial motif in the alto voice, thereby give the listener a sense of closure to the A section and also by reaffirming the A Major tonality. Another important aspect I noticed is the almost sine wave like melodic contour that is consistently present throughout the A section of the piece, with rising and falling present at an almost equal rate, which gives the music its extremely smooth and flowing character.
Brahms uses a different texture, with a lot of bass arpeggiation in the A section, and in the B section almost chorale-like writing. This textural difference helps in marking the form in an effective way. The opening motif of the B section is a retrograde (in terms of intervals) of the first motif of the A section. The melody in the first part of B section is a big Urinline descent start on m.49 going all the way up to m.54, similar to the m.30-34. Once again Brahms does not allow the line to descend all at once as it does in m.30-34. Instead, he decorates some of the notes with a four-note figure in eighth notes. The passage that follows (m.73-76), is a kind of transition to the A' section, and seems to be a reworking of the four-note decorations from m.50-51. The “rising leap” idea from m.2 is still present in a disguised form in m.52. The second half of this phrase is a reflection of the transformation that was done on first motif to yield the second. The leap of the 4th was extended to a 6th in this case. The chorale section starts with a motif in the top voice similar to the one in the closing section, but extends it to make it a 4-note motif. The melodic contour in the B section still retains the sine wave sort of character seen in A, and this aspect is really brought out in m.65-70. The last A section is like an abbreviation of the opening A section, and essentially is a repetition with some chromatic and rhythmic alterations in the top voice.

Another aspect of this piece worth discussing is the rhythm. Brahms makes effective use of metric displacement and polyrhythmic ideas to blur the bar line and the ¾ meter in which the music is. The first instance of metric displacement happens in m.16 when the second theme starts on beat 3 and shifts the accent pattern up one beat. It later comes back and aligns with the bar line in m.25. The same compositional device is used in the closing section, and has a similar effect on the ear. In the B section, Brahms continues to manipulate rhythm and meter and makes use of the hemiola. His use of canon, blurs the written bar line and this is especially evident in m.57-64 where the phrasing is displaced and we hear this passage not in
the written meter but in 4/4. Brahms makes use of syncopation as an effective tool in m.31-34. The sustained A in the tenor voice, helps in projecting the *Urlinie* descent in a much better way. The phrase structure for the most part is very classical in the sense, that it follows 4 and 8 measure structures. But at times (m. 25-30), the phrase is 6 measures long and helps in the prolongation of the dominant even further.

Another important feature of the B section, which makes it different from the A section in a significant way, is the large amount of canonical writing present. In m.49 the soprano is the leader and the alto follows. The canon is free and is augmented and wreaks havoc with the bar line. Measure 53 onwards also has a similar sort of canonical writing. In the chorale section the top voices of both the hands are in canon, two beats apart. Measure 65 onwards is similar to m.49 except that the soprano now follows the alto.

The last thing I would like to discuss is the harmonic aspect of this beautiful composition. I noticed that there has been a constant effort to de-emphasize the tonic-dominant relationship as much as possible by focusing more on subdominant and mediant harmonies. The use of weaker inversions of the tonic harmony and also their placement on weaker beats, further helps in making the tonic-dominant relationship more ambiguous. If we notice the opening four measures of the piece, we see that it is the sub-dominant chord, which takes up the major portion of that sub phrase, which is quite unusual when a composition is just starting off. The usual compositional tendency would be to reaffirm the tonic right away. The tonic is not merely established by implication, in fact, it shapes the phrase in a rather conventional way, but complex rhythmic features obscure the components of its prolongation. Compared to the A section, the B section is more diatonic.

Brahms makes effective use of non-functional passing chords of dominant pedals in A Section, to take the music from one point to the other. As Schenker stated, the bass note determines the harmonic function, and by having a pedal Brahms keeps the functionality in tact. Extensive use of mode mixtures is also present in this piece. He mostly borrows from
the parallel minor modes (m.33-34, m.16, m.20 etc.). Diminished chords are used both as
dominant functioning chords as well as common tone diminished chords and sometimes
also as pivot points to facilitate modulations. Augmented 6\textsuperscript{th} chord is used once, that too in
its root position. The Neopolitan chord is used in its second inversion towards the end of
the B section. Another compositional device, which Brahms puts to great effect, is the
extensive use of suspensions and retardations in order to make the harmonies less
demarcated, so that they merge into each other seamlessly. m. 76 is a classic example of
this, where three different harmonies are all piled on top of each other.

In this Intermezzo, the reshaping of phrase, motive, meter and form can be interpreted as an
agent of expansion and growth in developing the identity of the piece. This is a classic
example where one can see, how a composer would have the initial seed of a musical idea,
and then go on to bring out the entire piece modifying and restructuring elements from
that fundamental idea.

References:

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