



Some Aspects of Innovation in Brahms's F Sharp Minor Piano Sonata

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DOI: 10.32629/asc.v4i2.1527

Abstract: Brahms was commonly introduced as the successor to the classicism, while some consider him one of the most distinctive German composers of the 19th century. Among Brahms's oeuvre of various genre of orchestral, chamber, piano, and vocal music, large-scale works demonstrate the most obvious inheritance of classical style, however, they exhibit revolutionary qualities in specific technical aspects. This article explores some innovative features of Brahms's F sharp minor piano sonata in treatment of motive, tonal and syntax, to show that the progressive consciousness was emerging already in his early works.

Keywords: Innovation; Developing Variation; Tonality; Phrasing; F sharp minor Piano Sonata

1. Introduction

Studies on Brahms in the field of musicology have never stopped. Re-evaluation from Schoenberg, Carl Dahlhaus, as well as the recent achievements of George S. Bozarth and Walter Frisch, et al. led to the reposition of Brahms, and improved the musical perspectives and the research paths in 20th century. Composers in 19th-century with revolutionary consciousness, such as Richard Wagner, Liszt and Brahms were facing a common problem that is to deal with the paradox that between two trends: the themes tend to simplification, and the music form tends to large extension[1]. While Wagner and Liszt tried to expanding the scope of expression by concentrating on programme music, poetry and drama, Brahms explored some new methods in his creative practice of "absolute music", which led to some musical features that profound impact the development of German and Austrian instrumental music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Schoenberg's essay *Brahms the Progressive* is the most influential among Brahms Studies which emphasizes that, Brahms's significant originality on music was mainly reflected on the music expression, and the "developing variation" technique is the core factor of his innovation.

Brahms's progressiveness can be obviously experienced in his mature works after the 1860s. Nevertheless, this article focuses on Piano Sonata in F sharp minor, Op. 2 – one of his earliest works that composed in 1852 – to demonstrate that the progressive consciousness had already emerged in his early works, although these works more clearly follow the classical conventions. The overall formal scheme of F sharp minor sonata is as follows: the first movement "Allegro non troppo ma energico" is in conventional sonata form; the second movement "Andante con espressione" is a theme with three variations in B minor except that the last variation in B major, the melody of the theme can be fitted to the words of an old German Minnesang "Mir ist leide" as Brahms admitted to a friend of him[2]; the third movement is Scherzo with a trio, the scherzo section is in B minor and the trio section in D major; the finale begin with an Introduzione marked "Sostenuto" in A major, the main body of this movement "Allegro non troppo e rubato" is again in sonata form, and at the end of this, the "Sostenuto" material returns as a coda, in F sharp major.

Although this piece adopts the traditional tonal layout and the structural framework of classical sonatas, on the other hand, it contained kinds of Brahms's innovative technique that affecting his later composition crucially, while expanding the boundaries of classical style. The following content of this article is to explore some aspects of the piece such as "developing variation", tonal ambiguity, irregular phrasing through specific details, these features are, in a sense, the results of the combination of classical tradition and the new musical language of the time.

2. Developing Variation

In the Romantic era, a significant relationship between the variation methods and the development of the programme music can be observed from works such as Liszt's symphonic poems and Wagner's music dramas which both based on the grand narrative. With the variation technique, composers can not only enrich some distinctive characters of the literatures, but also elaborate the musical motives with symbolic meaning run through the whole works, in addition that is a good way to maintain music materials concise, at the same time strengthen the integration of the large music form. Liszt's thematic transformation and Wagner's leitmotif were very representative variation technique at that time, while Brahms's developing variation was different from them.

The developing variation is an important aspect of the Brahms's innovation, it often bases on the intervallic content (such as steps and leaps between a few notes), rather than on the thematic melody of period, sentence, even binary or ternary form in traditional variation technique. Though they are not easy to perceive, these units constructed the appearance of music ideas. Schoenberg has considered that, the developing variation was created by Bach from his numerous counterpoints and fugues writing, later inherited and developed by the Vienna classical composers, then with Brahms, achieved higher quality[3]. Developing variation provided an effective support for Brahms's individual style, that is, through this method his musical organization got rid of the limitation of material processing in traditional theme types, obtaining compactness and richness. In a sense, Brahms's profound understanding of the classical style and preference for the absolute music contributed to his improvement of developing variation[4].

It is mentioned in *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* by Walter Frisch that, developing variation not only helps to establish a themes, but also helps to generate new materials from basic motive, applying them to the entire movement, and even to all movements of a cycle.

2.1 The Establishment of Themes

Before Schoenberg put forward the concept of developing variation, Richard Strauss has already noticed at the end of the 19th century that “the core material for composing from a motive is rarely longer than 2 or 4 bars, while the rest is the skills of elaboration, unfolding and emphasis”. This is the fundamental idea of establishing themes with developing variation.

In Brahms's theme, the development of motives seldom in a mechanical way or with excessive changing, i.e. neither build a symmetrical theme with the repetition of sub-phrase (ex. 1), nor combine the motives that without inner relationship (ex. 2), but driving the process gradually in a more logical way, so that the theme will achieve a balance between similarity and contrast (ex. 3).



Example 1. The opening of Mozart's piano sonata in C minor, K. 457 - I. Allegro.

In ex. 1, Mozart used the regular repetition pattern (original 4 bars statement followed by 4 bars response). The theme began with “Mannheim rocket” figure, answered by the chords connection of I-VII7, then the basic idea appears in dominant version, follow by the harmony progression of VII7-I.

Example 2. The opening of Schubert's piano sonata in A minor, D 786 - I. Allegro giusto.

In ex. 2, Schubert's theme contains three kinds of motives that with different characteristics: the first motive (bars 1-4) features octave unison of the minims in a solemn gesture, and within an obvious dotted rhythm. The second motive (bars 11-14) formed by flowing crotchets with upbeat meter, which gained a singing quality. The third motive (bars 21-22) is merely fragment-like descending minor thirds.



Example 3. Second movement from Brahms's piano sonata in F sharp minor, Op. 2, bars.1-8.

In Brahms's case (ex. 3), the motive consists of no more than two elements which are presented already in bar 1: an ascending motion of B, C# and D (labeled X), and a downward leap from D to A# (labeled Y), the Y assumes diminished 4th here, and the leaps subsequently containing the minor 3rd (labeled Y-), the perfect 4th (labeled Y+), the major 3rd (same interval as the diminished 4th, also labeled Y), the major 6th - which is the inversion of minor 3rd (labeled Y-I, "I" refers to "inversion"), and the minor 6th (labeled YI).

Bar 2: the bass voice is X plus Y-, while the right hand play inverted X & Y-.

Bar 3: simply X and inverted Y+.

Bar 4: the bass voice is X plus inverted Y, right hand play inverted X & Y-.

Bar 5: the leap on the left hand is Y+, and Y-I for right hand.

Bar 6: the leap on the left hand is Y, and Y-I for right hand.

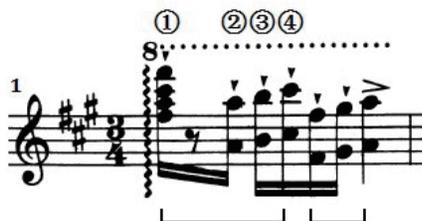
Bar 7: the voice on the left hand is inverted X.

Bar 8: inverted YI on the right hand.

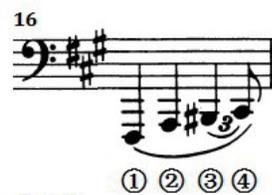
Here the eight bars formal unit – the first half of a variation theme – grows out of the first bar by means of fragmentation and elaboration, only generated from two simple elements in the initial idea.

2.2 The Evolution of Motive within a Movement

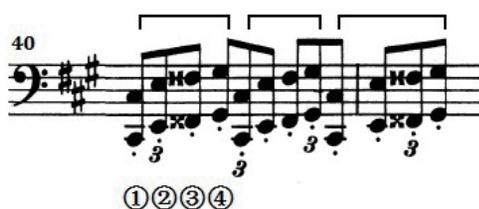
In Brahms's F sharp minor sonata, four distinct musical ideas of the first movement are homologous. Based on the principle of developing variation, the initial four notes continuously evolve and run through most of the exposition, and even the entire movement.



Ex. 4a



Ex. 4b



Ex. 4c



Ex. 4d

Example 4(a-d). Four different forms of initial motive evolution in the exposition.

Ex. 4a presents the first statement of this 4 notes motive, it beginning with leap of a third (in this example, although the upper note F# appears in the high register, the relationship of third is clear, and of course, the literal sixth can also be explained as an inversion of the third), and following the stepwise-ascending in the rest.

Bass line in ex. 4b (bar 16) opens the transition passage, which the shape of the motive is completely different from that in the first bar.

The subordinate theme begins in bar 40, as ex. 4c shows, the 4 notes motive presented here in the rhythmic pattern of triplets, this leads to a complexity that note groups of quadruple against the rhythm patterns of triple.

A new module of the second subject starts from bar 51 (ex. 4d), here the motive is adopted in an inverted form with more complex transformation of note values, thus generating a lyrical theme in E major.

The strategy of incorporating a fundamental motive throughout the entire movement is clearly influenced by Beethoven – whose works were familiar by Brahms. But Brahms goes even further in this piece, the evolution of initial motive is more diverse, and given the smaller scale of the basic elements, the utilization of motive is more intensive and extensive.

2.3 The Integration of Cycle

The interval motives in Brahms's F sharp minor Piano Sonata were evolved to the various themes with developing variation in different movements, so as to make different characters highly unified by similar materials. Ex. 5(a-d) indicates the intervallic content as the basic element of the theme from four movements.



Example 5a. 1st movement: Allegro non troppo, bars 16-17.

The initial motive of the “transition theme” from first movement contains four notes: F#, A, B#, and C# (ex. 5a), which organize intervals of a 3rd (minor) and two 2nds (an augmented and a minor one). And as mentioned above, this motive is homologous with other themes in the movement (main theme, and two stages of the subordinate theme), despite the subtle differences in specific intervals (see ex. 4).



Example 5b. 2nd movement: Andante con espressione, bars 1-2.

The main motive in second movement contains four notes that of B, C#, D, A#, as well as two 2nds (a major and a minor one), and a diminished 4th (the enharmonic interval of a major third).



Example 5c. 3rd movement: Scherzo, bars 1-2.

The initial motive in third movement also contains B, C#, D, and A#, same as the motive in second movement, and thus enhances the continuity between the two movements, especially considering that they share the same home tonality B minor,

and the situation that the second movement ends with a half cadence followed by the indication “attacca”. Therefore, when scherzo enters, the audience seems to have heard an additional variation.

Example 5d. 4th movement: Introduzione, bars 1-2 (left figure), and Allegro non troppo e rubato, bars 25-26 (right figure).

Both the initial motives of Introduzione and the main theme in exposition from the finale consist of 4 notes, which organize two 2nds (although not identical) in both sides and a 5th in the middle.

Similar to the strategy discussed in 1.2, ex. 5(a-d) shows that the themes from four movements are closely related to each other. The basic motives of these themes contain similar interval connotations, of which are built from two 2nds and a leap of 3rd (a leap of 5th in ex. 5d as an exception).

3. Tonal Ambiguity

Musical passage with presentation functions usually plays a role in shaping a unique musical image, in which the tonal and the harmony being important aspects of musical content. Brahms’s Piano Sonata in F sharp minor contains many unconventional harmonic language, due to the creatively make use of unstable harmony as well as the rapidly changing of harmonic direction, the tonality become ambiguous. The following section will discuss the methods of tonal and harmony disposition, and mainly talk about two aspects.

3.1 Weakening the Stability of Tonality

Rosen has pointed out that Brahms broke though the traditional mode of establishing classical tonality, and he always moved to another while building one[5]. The establishment of the classical tonality usually depends on the cadence and the stability of the tonic function, but Brahms shows obvious intention to deconstruct the tonal stability during the music developing. In the following example of the opening movement (part of transition passage in exposition), the processes of modulating and returning are not explicit. With an acceleration of harmonic rhythm, a series of sequential repetition rapidly leads to the dominant arrival which functions a preparation for the key of subordinate theme.

Example 6. I. Allegro non troppo, bars 14-30.

In bars 16-20, the tonality of F sharp minor is clear, and chords of tonic and dominant alternate each bar, the anticipations present on the last quaver of the triplets in all of these bars. The tonic in bars 16 and 18 contains chromatic passing note B#, while the dominant in bars 17 and 19 involve minor ninth.

The tonality becomes unstable already in bar 21 with subdominant minor chord of A major (relative major of F sharp minor). This chord changes to a diminished seventh chord (based on D) in bar 22 through linear progression of the voices.

In bar 23, if we consider the notes D both in the bass and upper voices as the suspensions, the chords connection show obviously a cadence of A major, i.e. K46-V, and resolve to the tonic in bar 24 (in the first inversion literally).

What in bar 25 is actually the dominant of F sharp minor, in which the fifth of the chord is replaced by suspensions A. Then it resolves to the tonic in bar 26, but the suspension in the bass weakening the stability of the tonic chord.

Bars 27-29: with the technique of structural fragmentation, the tonality turns towards a new direction – C sharp minor, which is the harmonic goal of the exposition.

We can conclude from above that, music in this passage was combined the traditional harmonic function with the features of tonal expansion in Romantic Era. The frequently used of suspensions and anticipations, for example, contributed the fluidity of the connection between chords, as well as added the ambiguity to modulating process.

With this example, the intention of weakening the stability of tonality has been revealed. The method used in this passage – that is, expressing the instability of harmony through certain unified figures – is also effective in establishing a theme, in this case, the feeling of disorder that due to the unresolved dissonance can be compensated by the consistency of figures. That is Brahms's experiment based on the 18th century composition tradition.

3.2 Frequent Modulation in Theme Area

In a traditional musical form, whether it is sonata form, rondo form, ternary form, or other forms, the main function of a theme is to present a musical gesture on a specific tonal region, and the modulation does not occur frequently in thematic units (more observed in the transitional and development section on the contrary). However, such practice was appeared commonly in themes of Brahms's works.

Example 7. I. Allegro non troppo, bars 52-71.

In this section of second subject in exposition of first movement, the tonality modulated several times in a dozen bars: bars 52-59 are in E major (this theme unit opened in E major starts already in bar 51, which is not shown in the example), and go into E minor in bars 60-62, then transfer to F major and D minor continuously in bars 63-68, at the end of bar 68, it is already prepared for C sharp minor.

Placing different tonality in the middle stage of a second group and then returning to its initial tonal seem to be influenced by Franz Schubert more or less[6], but compared to Schubert's typically understatement of the modulation procedure, here Brahms elaborates this process, makes modulating more complicate, and resulting a sustained tension in harmony.

4. Irregular Phrasing

Comparing with classical masters, composers in the Romantic period organized phrases more freely and irregularly. However, as a tradition, the symmetrical structure phrases still profoundly influenced the creation of 19th century composers such as Chopin, Schumann and Liszt. The irregular phrasing defined in this article refers to the themes which are seldom contains repetitions and symmetrical patterns among these phrases. This kind of music was vividly described as "musical prose" in *Brahms the Progressive* by Schoenberg, who pointed that Wagner also tended to compose musical prose, but only in his later works[3].

Piano Sonata in F sharp minor was written in 1852, almost Brahms's first large-scale work recognized by the composer himself (there is evidence to suggest that at least two earlier sonatas were destroyed by this self-critical composer himself. [7]), for it was actually completed earlier than his Piano Sonata in C major, Op. 1, just only a little later published. In this work, Brahms had begun to use irregular phrasing a lot.

Allegro non troppo ma energico

Example 8. I. Allegro non troppo, bars 1-21.

Ex. 8 shows the main theme of first movement. Bars 1 to 15 as a whole can be divided into two parts. The first one (bars 1-8) forms “(1+1) +4+2” pattern, which contains three materials (a, b, c). The second one (bars 9-15) is formed as “1+6”, containing “a” and “d”, in which “d” is the reduction of “a”. After further reduction and augmentation, the first subject stops on the dominant chord. With the irregular phrasing, the coherence of the whole theme was achieved in a flexible manner.

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of a piece, titled "Introduzione Sostenuto". The score is written for piano and is in the key of D major (two sharps) and 3/4 time. It consists of six systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system (bars 1-8) is marked *mf* and contains three distinct musical materials labeled 'a', 'b', and 'c'. Material 'a' spans bars 1-2, 'b' spans bars 3-4, and 'c' spans bars 5-8. The second system (bars 9-15) begins with a *pp* dynamic and features a long, flowing melodic line in the right hand. A bracket labeled 'c' spans bars 9-15, and a note indicates to "Repeat the pattern of first phrase". The third system (bars 16-21) starts with *pp* and includes a *pp leggiero* section. The fourth system (bars 22-24) is marked *p espress.* and contains material 'b' (bars 22-23) and material 'd' (bars 24-25). The fifth system (bars 26-31) is marked *p* and includes a *pesante* section. The sixth system (bars 32-37) is marked *sf* and includes a *cresc.* section and a *lunga* section. The score concludes with a *sf* dynamic and a *lunga* section.

Example 9. IV. Introduzione Sostenuto, bars 1-24.

Ex. 9: The whole organization of the Introduzione from fourth movement can be divided into three phrases. The first one (bars 1-8) is formed as “4+2+2”, containing three kinds of materials “a, b, c”. The second phrase is the repetition of the first one but transposed. And the third one (bars 18-24) contains two kinds of materials “b” and “d”, in which “d” is a fusion of many different short figures with improvisational manner, its unrestrained phrase structure promote the quality of “musical prose” in the Introduzione.

5. Conclusion

Through the analytic research of F sharp minor Piano Sonata we can see that, Brahms made a revolutionary exploration on the basis of classical sonata structure. The developing variation technique contributed to more organic material development and more concentrated musical content. The method of tonal ambiguity is the way romantic composers used to weaken the function of harmony, it is also important in Brahms' later works. The irregular phrasing as a kind of music languages that Brahms was excels at, provides a unique aesthetic quality to his works. In addition, other important aspects of the work – such as the trio section of the third movement significantly based on the pervasive triple hypermeter, and numerous improvisational elements adopt in the fourth movement – also deserve special attention.

Paul Henry Lang once regarded Brahms as a “counter currents” composer[8], which is correct in a certain context, but it does not mean that Brahms is merely a successor of the classicism, whose works have influenced the development of music in later generations, inspired composers like Schoenberg, Berg and others. We should recognize that Brahms's innovation was not because he created a new style, but owing to his affluent creative thinking in compositions. Although Brahms's early works were not sufficient to represent his main style, their progressiveness has been revealed, and these aspects have gradually developed into important features of his mature works.

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