

The Aesthetics of Textural Ambiguity: Brahms and the Changing Piano

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The thought beneath so slight a film
Is more distinctly seen
As laces just reveal the surge
Or Mists the Apennine
—Emily Dickinson

Introduction

In recent years, a number of performance practice scholars writing on Brahms's piano music have commented on the prominence of low-lying melodic lines, thickly-written accompaniments, and often dense saturation of the lower register.¹ For such writers these textural features constitute proof that Brahms could not have intended performance on the modern piano. Firms such as Steinway, Bechstein, and Chickering were manufacturing pianos by the early 1860s, roughly the midpoint of Brahms's life, that already exhibited most of the important design innovations that distinguish modern pianos from earlier ones, and these firms enjoyed enormous success across Europe.² Performance practice scholars have argued that the increased power and sustain of these pianos create irreparable problems of balance and clarity in much of Brahms's music, implying that he was writing for the lighter and more transparent instruments that predate the modern piano, many of which were still manufactured up until the end of the century.

The view that low-lying melodies and densely packed textures in the lower register present an undesirable muddiness on the modern piano was already being elaborated towards the end of the nineteenth century. During the last decades of Brahms's life, several treatises appeared elucidating the fundamental principles of what they proclaimed to be the "modern school of pianoforte playing." Three treatises in particular, those by Hans Schmitt (1893), Aleksandr Nikitich Bukhovtsev (1897), and Adolph Christiani (c. 1885), each promote melodic projection, transparency of sonority, and clear hierarchization of the texture through dynamic layering as important ideals for piano music. In addition to providing numerous examples of piano textures suited to achieving those ideals on the modern piano, they warn against other textures that result in harsh or muddy sonorities. In fact, their discussions of undesirable piano writing focus on qualities of register and spacing which are precisely the characteristics of Brahms's piano music

pointed to by modern performance practice scholars as evidence of Brahms's preference for lighter, more transparent pianos.

This modern presumption is founded on the supposition that Brahms would agree that such textures do indeed produce adverse and inartistic effects on the modern piano and that textural clarity was Brahms's intent. The musical examples referred to in this article, however, demonstrate this supposition to be a misinterpretation of Brahms's piano writing. On the contrary, the examples represent cases where the avoidance of melodic projection and textural clarity was an essential aspect of his aesthetic intent, and the source of a unique and evocative type of ambiguity. Although the same kind of textural ambiguity and predilection for the lower registers may be found in other genres (particularly the vocal music and chamber music), in this article I have confined the discussion to examples from his solo piano literature in order to compare my remarks to the late nineteenth-century treatises; their discussion of musical clarity is directly linked to acoustic aspects of the piano itself. To consider Brahms's piano writing in the context of these late nineteenth-century writings and to recognize his cultivation of textural ambiguity leads one to reconsider the aesthetic implications of Brahms's ambiguous textures, and to arrive at an understanding that is altogether different from the interpretations that have been widely accepted in modern performance practice literature.

Brahms and the "Veiled" Melodic Line

The opening of the B section of Brahms's Ballade in B Minor, op. 10, no. 4 (example 1), contains a unique performance direction: "Col intimissimo sentimento, ma senza troppo marcare la melodia" (With the most intimate sentiment, but without marking out the melody too much).³ This provocative admonition describes the composer's vision for twenty-five measures of haunting *pianissimo* music. The deeply introspective theme evokes a profound longing and grief, whose intensity is never released in an ardent or violent outburst but instead remains muted and distant. Brahms's direction to the performer suggests that the poignant melodic line is meant to remain a translucent specter, dimly emanating from behind the delicate sonic veil of the accompaniment.⁴

Aside from the specificity of his performance indications in this section, Brahms has written a piano texture designed in every respect to partially obscure the melodic line. To begin with, the melody is embedded within the accompaniment rather than isolated above it. As indicated by the double stemming, the melodic line remains an inner voice within the undulating accompanimental figure, and it is covered throughout by an upper voice.

Example 1: Ballade in B Minor, op. 10, no. 4, mm. 47–55 (1854).

Più lento
Col intimissimo sentimento, ma senza troppo marcare la melodia

47
pp
And

49
And *

51

53
 1

54b
 2
pp
dolce

Furthermore, the theme is confined to a relatively low tessitura, primarily settled below middle C. The timbre of a piano is mellow and dark in this register in contrast to the piercing quality of its treble, and therefore the melody is not as penetrating as it would be if set higher. Another effect of the melodic voice's low tessitura is that, because it inhabits the same register as the accompaniment, it is not timbrally distinct from the rest of the texture. A pianist can counteract this tendency by consciously voicing the melodic notes with their own distinct sound quality, but Brahms's direction indicates that he does not want the melody clearly separated from the rest of the texture. Finally, the melodic voice is doubled by a lower, primarily parallel harmonic voice, lending a still darker quality to the melody.

Another factor that contributes to the “veiled” quality of the section is the dense saturation of the lower register. On a piano, the fundamental pitches of individual chord members are markedly less distinct in close-positioned chords than in widely spaced ones. This effect is far more pronounced in the lower registers than in the treble register, where increased resonance amplifies the effects of sympathetic vibration. In the *Ballade*, the dense background of overtones resulting from Brahms’s saturation of the lower register creates a kind of sonic fog that interferes with melodic clarity. The extreme depth of the bass notes also contributes to the complexity of the halo of overtones. The combination of all these textural and registral features represents Brahms’s utilization of the unique acoustic behavior of the piano to obscure the musical surface and minimize the clear delineation of the melodic line.

This passage typifies a kind of textural ambiguity that is prevalent in a number of Brahms’s piano works. Though he never again explicitly asks for the melody to be played without clear delineation, there are other cases where the melodic voice, owing to its low tessitura and the density of the accompaniment, is not clearly projected in the foreground. One such piece is the *C# Minor Capriccio*, op. 76, no. 5. In the opening section of the piece, Brahms has done everything possible to obscure the melody (example 2). Projection of the primary thematic line is limited by its register, and the close proximity to the chromatic line prevents separation from the rest of the texture. Brahms’s chromatic saturation creates a snarl of sound that blurs individual notes within the moving eighth-note passage. The resulting clamor presents a sonic backdrop from which the melodic strand is unable to ring out clearly. Furthermore, the bass line is reinforced by octave doublings, while the melody itself is not doubled.

When the *Capriccio* returns to the opening material, however, its texture is transformed. Once the primary theme makes its return (example 3), the obstacles preventing the clear projection of the melody have been removed. Indeed, this section takes on a triumphant character with the theme’s accession to authority. The octave doubling of the bass line is absent, thinning the sonic backdrop, while it is the melody that is reinforced through doubling. The execution of the accompaniment is relegated entirely to the performer’s left hand, facilitating a more powerful execution of the melody by an unfettered right hand. Furthermore, the theme soars high into the treble and is separated registrally from the chromatic movement.

Comparison of Brahms’s initial treatment of the theme in example 2 and its recapitulation in example 3 suggests that he was well aware of the effect of his “over-written” accompaniment and over-saturation of the piano’s lower register. In the *C# Minor Capriccio* Brahms crafts an almost impenetrable “tangle of sound”⁵ at the outset to signify chaos, and yet he uses the murky

Example 2: C# Minor Capriccio, op. 76, no. 5, mm. 1–11 (1878).

Agitato, ma non troppo presto
Sehr aufgeregt, doch nicht zu schnell

poco f

Example 3: C# Minor Capriccio, op. 76, no. 5, mm. 86–90 (1878).

quality of the piano’s lower register not merely as an arbitrary experiment in local color, but as a distinct thematic region with a specific function in the work’s dramatic structure. The dramatic transformation at measure 86 of the material from the opening bars, with the contrasting clarification of texture and marked stratification of the theme, embodies a kind of struggle with and ultimate ascension over the chaos in which the piece opens. Thus, in this work Brahms’s characteristic textural ambiguity is an integral part of the narrative.

Trends in Piano Composition by the End of Brahms’s Career

In order to understand the unique aesthetic problems that Brahms creates through textural ambiguity, it is illuminating to compare his writing for the piano with ideas on piano performance and composition embraced by some of Brahms’s contemporaries. Hans Schmitt’s *The Pedals of the Piano-Forte and Their Relation to Piano-forte Playing and the Teaching of Composition and Acoustics* (1893) was an edition of a series of four lectures that Schmitt

Current Musicology

gave at the Conservatory of Music in Vienna—Brahms’s own backyard. In this book, Schmitt discusses “the modern use of the pedal,” which he declares has “occasioned . . . a revolution in the manner of composing for the piano” (1893:29). Summing up the differences between his own and earlier generations of pianists, he declares,

The importance to which the pedal has in our days attained can be appreciated when we consult the older piano schools. From what is to be seen in his *Grand School for the Piano*, [Johann Nepomuk] Hummel seems to have regarded the pedal mainly as a means of creating confusion . . . He seems never to have discovered how much the instrument gains in resonance by the use of the pedal, apparently holding it immaterial for beauty of tone whether, during a long tone, the pedal be used or not. (1893:30)

It is clear that for Schmitt the beauty of the piano’s sound lies in the richness of its resonance. Through lengthy discussions of the overtone series and the piano’s capacity for sympathetic vibration he hopes to guide performers and composers to a cultivation of that richness. Not surprisingly, he holds the conviction that the piano sounds more beautiful when the pedal is used than when it is not used. According to Schmitt,

Because the pedal strengthens and beautifies the tone, it should be used with every single tone and chord whose duration is long enough to admit of the foot being lowered and raised during the same, whether the composer has indicated it or not. (1893:30)

This emphasis on the pedaled sound is an important part of the shift in piano aesthetics over the nineteenth century. Interestingly, though he refers to “the older piano schools,” he makes no mention of differences between instruments from the end of nineteenth century and those designed at the beginning. Hummel, who died in 1837, would not live to see the iron-framed, cross-strung pianos that began to dominate the piano market by the early 1860s. The use of iron enabled pianos to support much greater string tension, increasing the overall resonance and slowing the decay of sound. The effects of these developments were bound to affect how some composers wrote for the piano, and what Schmitt calls the “modern school” of pianoforte playing demonstrates how a large group of his contemporaries responded to those developments.

One of the most important characteristics Schmitt sees in his own generation of pianists and composers is a new appreciation of the resonance gained through sympathetic vibrations on the piano. Example 4 shows one of several musical figures Schmitt uses to demonstrate sympathetic vibration. To execute the example, Schmitt instructs the player to “press down the key of the large C without allowing it to sound, and then strike the

Example 4: Demonstration of the effect of sympathetic vibration (Schmitt 1893:33).

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff, labeled 'Sounding', is in treble clef and shows a single note (C) being struck and then held down. The middle staff, labeled 'Silent', is in bass clef and shows a single note (C) being held down. The bottom staff, labeled 'Effect', is in treble clef and shows a single note (C) being struck and then held down. The notation is in 4/4 time and consists of four measures.

small c above, strong and staccato, whereupon the tone c will sound clearly from the C string and be sustained as long as it is held down” (1893:33). What the example demonstrates is that strings of pitches that are closely related in the overtone series will vibrate sympathetically even when not struck by the hammer and thus contribute to the overall richness of the sonority. However, the significance of this demonstration would have been entirely lost on Hummel for the simple reason that on the pianos that existed during his lifetime the after-ring from the silently held note would not be nearly as audible—it would quickly disappear. Sympathetic vibrations did not contribute as much to the overall sound on pianos of Hummel’s day, even with the dampers raised. The piano tone that Schmitt is describing comes from substantial reverberations of sympathetic vibrations from the undamped strings. Virtually every design feature that distinguishes the later nineteenth-century pianos from earlier ones maximizes the reverberations of undamped strings; the effect on the tone is unlike that of any piano Hummel could have heard.

Developments in piano building ultimately led to a marked shift in musical aesthetics toward the end of the nineteenth century. Schmitt assesses the aesthetic differences between earlier generations and his own:

Speaking in general, it seems as though the history of music manifests changes similar to those in the history of painting. At certain epochs color was especially cultivated: in others, drawing enjoyed the pre-eminence. Our present music seems in particular to be characterized by a development of tone color. (1893:28)

We can understand why he identified “the development of tone color” as the focus of his generation’s “modern music” if we appreciate that this generation experienced changes in instrument-making that offered richness and complexity of tone as new resources, the creative potential of which had only begun to be explored. In this quotation, it is evident that Schmitt considers the cultivation of the pedaled sound to represent the defining cultural/artistic development of his own generation’s piano music.

Schmitt's preference for the pedaled sound has considerable ramifications for what he considers to be ideal ways of writing for the piano. Though he considers the resonance and sustain of the piano to be the instrument's great virtues, at the same time he is eminently conscious of the potential obstacles these attributes present to textural clarity. Schmitt consistently promotes clarity of sonority as a fundamental artistic aim. Therefore, his ideal textures for the piano are those in which the pedal may be used liberally without fear of creating a muddy or indefinite sound. He describes various conditions in which the use of the pedal is dangerous or impossible, consistently relegating these types of piano texture to the "older school." He further claims that such textures are "disappearing from the music of today" because they do not permit the use of the pedal (1893:29).

Chief among these problematic textures are harmonic progressions where inner voices move by stepwise motion or contain notes foreign to the harmony, such as sustained tones sounded across underlying harmonic changes. Schmitt seems to identify the prevailing piano aesthetic of his generation as heavily favoring homophonic passages. In fact he repeatedly refers to "the older polyphonic style," in which music "made up equally of chord and scale passages" was more prevalent. Indeed, he even claims that scales themselves have gone "out of vogue" (1893:29). He also warns against including non-harmonic tones in arpeggiated figures unless they occur at points that permit a change of pedal. This instruction proceeds from his belief that the pedal should be changed with every harmonic change unless the latter occurs in the upper register of the piano where the strings are undamped anyway (1893:20, 53).

A major point of emphasis for Schmitt is the special handling required for the piano's middle to low registers, where the resonance of overtones is at its thickest. In addition to warning of the dangers of scalar passages in the lower register, he emphasizes the need for spacing between chord members in order to create what he considers the ideal sonority on the piano:

In the lower part of the instrument, chords in extended positions sound much better than those in close positions. From acoustics we learn that in the nature of musical sounds a low, close position does not exist. (1893:23)

Schmitt's claim here is that his aesthetic positions have a basis in the laws of acoustics. Chord spacing must follow the natural overtone series, which begins with an octave followed by a fifth; therefore open spacing is considered more natural and thus more artistically pleasing. He extends the need for spacing to arpeggios as well:

It must also be remarked that arpeggios in close position taken with the pedal sound much worse on the lower part of the piano than in the middle or higher part . . . The lower the pitch of the chords, the less endurable becomes this holding of the pedal during changes of harmony, and on the very low keys even the close position of a broken chord played with the pedal sounds more or less false. (1893:53)

Schmitt considers problematic any texture that in some way interferes with the clear presentation of melody. He claims that while unaccompanied close-position chords and scales sound “confused” and “dissonant,” they become acceptable when pulled into focus by a clearly projected melody. “Players who have the skill to bring the melody out clearly soften many dissonances even without the pedal; the related tones blend with the melody, while the others fade away” (1893:57). For Schmitt, a firmly projected melody counteracts the “confused” sound of “problematic” textures by providing focus. In his words, “The strongest tone is, so to speak, the focus from which the tone-waves emerge, all the other tones being governed by it” (1893:58).

Schmitt does offer one caveat in the midst of these prohibitions: the use of close-position chords or arpeggios, though a major impediment to clarity and purity of tone, is permissible when “such a mingling of tones is necessary in order to characterize the spirit of the composition.” From his point of view, any deviation from optimal textural clarity constitutes a kind of special effect, which, though perhaps not particularly beautiful, may be appropriate to certain kinds of expression (1893:55). He explains that examples of such effects are often to be found in compositions of a “wild and gloomy character” (1893:73).

Another contemporary publication, Aleksandr Nikitich Bukhovtsev’s *Guide to the Proper Use of the Pianoforte Pedals* (1897), reinforces many of the same notions. Like Schmitt, Bukhovtsev associates polyphonic music with older generations and urges special consideration of the middle to lower registers of the piano:

The pedal can be used only very sparingly in older polyphonic works, and then only for a short time, because these works are played principally in a moderate tempo, are written for the middle portion of the pianoforte, and contain comparatively few harmonic figures. (1897:25)

The reference to “harmonic figures” echoes Schmitt’s assertion that accompanimental arpeggios and other figurations should not be melodic in and of themselves, but rather should simply help create a harmonic backdrop. He also warns against close-positioned sonorities, except in cases “where the effect of a rustle or noise is intended” (1897:26):

Current Musicology

The pedal always sounds unclear when used with harmonic figures in close position in the lower portion of the pianoforte, however well the instrument may be in tune. The reason is that the over and under tones assert themselves strongly in this part of the pianoforte. (Bukhovtsev 1897:33)

Bukhovtsev's discussion of the half-pedal (pressing the damper pedal down halfway for a somewhat reduced sustaining effect) makes note of another textural requirement for clarity of sonority in piano music: the separation of the bass line from the rest of the texture. He claims, "The use of the half pedal is successful in proportion to the depth of the bass note, its distance from the other voices, and the strength with which it is struck." In certain cases he allows that a half-pedal can be held through changes of harmony occurring above a sustained bass note, but only "if no particular clearness and precision of tone are required . . . [and] if, contrary to the highest artistic claims, a certain mist-like, cloudy, or indefinite effect is to be produced" (1897:36).

This passage is revealing in that it equates "the highest artistic claims" with clarity. Both Schmitt and Bukhovtsev emphasize avoiding close-position sonorities because of the more pronounced "mingling of tones" (1897:55) resulting from sympathetic vibration. Both also note that playing the bass or the melody more distinctly can mitigate the effect. From their remarks it is evident that a stratification of the texture through dynamic contrast, what pianists call "voicing," was an important feature of the "modern" piano performance style promoted by these treatises and that this hierarchization was directly related to the overtones and resonance of the late nineteenth-century piano.

Another treatise from the period, Adolph Christiani's *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing* (c. 1885),⁶ illustrates how important clear hierarchization of texture was to some of Brahms's contemporaries. Christiani declares,

The real sphere for pianoforte music is certainly "polyphony." Polyphony is the proper domain of the pianist in which he is supreme, and in which no other instrumentalist, not even the organist, can compare with him. (c. 1885:222)

The reason for this, according to Christiani, is the "judiciousness of touch" (c. 1885:222), or in other words, dynamic contrast—possible on the piano but not on the organ or harpsichord. This type of polyphony is different from the "older polyphonic style" referred to in the other treatises cited. It is one in which the separate layers of the texture are kept distinct and in a clear hierarchical order through dynamic contrast, rather than one characterized

by balanced activity or melodic interest in multiple voices that may share the same register.

A fundamental aspect of Christiani's ideal handling of texture is the clear division between melody and accompaniment and the audibility of that division to the listener. Whereas Christiani asserts that the melody "invariably demands primary power" (c. 1885:223), accompaniments on the other hand "have no dynamic rank at all, excepting a negative one, that of being least important" (c. 1885:242). In fact, he claims,

No passage or embellishment around a canto can ever be in good taste or of good effect, unless they are played in subdued proportion to the melody. They should be transparent as trelliswork, delicate as arabesques,—an ornament, not an encumbrance. This is a maxim universally accepted, the gist of which holds always good, even in fortissimo playing. (c. 1885:225)

Within Christiani's section on "The Dynamics of Melody," he includes a subsection called "Not Plainly Discernible Melodies." This subsection deals with cases where the melody is "doubtful or hidden" (Christiani c. 1885:224). Referring to textures in which the melody is interwoven into the accompanimental fabric instead of isolated from it, much like the *più lento* section from Brahms's B Minor Ballade, Christiani declares, "Its discernment assumes the proportion of an intellectual task which to solve correctly not every pianist is sufficiently thoughtful or capable" (c. 1885:224).

Christiani's stance on the aesthetics of textural ambiguity is interesting in that he views a composer's obfuscation of melody as a problem for the pianist to solve and, in a sense, to eradicate for the listener. Rather than presenting a texture in which the identity and primacy of a thematic line is in question, he requires the pianist to come to a firm decision about which is the primary thematic line and to make sure it is well marked off from the rest of the texture. As for textures in which two or more true melodic threads exist simultaneously (calling into question the hierarchy of parts), Christiani urges the pianist to impose a hierarchy on the texture and be sure that it is clearly audible to the listener:

The importance of deciding which of two simultaneous melodies is the principal one can hardly be overrated; and the necessity of bringing this perception clearly before the listener, must be evident to every one. (c. 1885:237)

The kind of textural clarity called for in these treatises depends on practical considerations of acoustic transparency for the purpose of presenting music that is conceptually clear, facilitating a kind of cognitive

Current Musicology

transparency for the listener. Thus, there is a specific aesthetic outlook underlying the practical advice offered by these authors. Their estimation of the listener's capacity to enjoy the music is linked to their estimation of the listener's capacity to understand it. Careful handling of the lower registers and avoidance of close-spacing and frequent non-harmonic tones are acoustic strategies for taking advantage of the richness of the piano's pedaled sound without leading to a mass of sound that might confuse or disorient the listener. Hierarchization of the texture likewise leads to a more "penetrable" sonority. By selectively foregrounding only part of the texture (often just one melodic voice) and subordinating the rest of the texture, the pianist can minimize the build-up of sound and allow everything to be more easily heard. At the same time, however, this hierarchization is a means of separating the various components of a texture, clearly defining the role and importance of each separate part. The music is thus packaged in a way that is easier for the listener to grasp.

Brahms and Textural Ambiguity

Treatment of balance and thematic primacy remain among the most notorious problems confronting performers of Brahms's music. Evidence of Brahms's own views on these issues is scarce, but some hints can be found in his letters and in recollections by contemporaries. There is one particular case, the String Quintet in G Major, op. 111, in which the difficulties in balance and melodic projection caused a great deal of consternation for the performers premiering the work, leading to a valuable exchange between Brahms and Joseph Joachim.⁷ The cellist premiering the work, Reinhold Hummer, complained that his opening solo could not be heard properly because it was set underneath four other string lines, all playing sixteenth notes *sempre forte*. Turning to Joachim for advice on this passage, Brahms complains of his contemporaries' tendency to underplay accompaniments: "Now here [i.e., in Vienna], in my opinion, one is all too accustomed to accompanying every solo *p*" (Avin 2003:30).

Ultimately, the passage proved troublesome not only for the players but also for Brahms himself. He did not acquiesce to Hummer's plea that the upper strings play the accompaniment *piano* but still felt "the proper sound wasn't achieved either" (Avin 2003:30). He appealed to Joachim for advice, proposing some alternative ideas. Nevertheless, in what is perhaps an instance of a composer indicating his disdain for the unhappy collision of his idealized conceptualization with unavoidable laws of acoustics, he dismissed the whole problem saying, "Forgive me, but this trivial point was quite irksome to me" (Avin 1997:676).

Did Brahms set the melody in the quintet underneath the accompaniment because he didn't want it to project as well as it might have had it been in a brighter upper voice? As we have seen, this seems to have been the case in the *lento* section of the B Minor Ballade, where the low tessitura of the melodic line and its submergence beneath the accompaniment leads to a "veiled" sonority, and where his directions for the performer confirm an intention to partially obscure the theme. Brahms himself alludes to an enthusiasm for low-lying vocal lines in an 1857 letter to Julius Otto Grimm: "What can be done with the impossible alto part in my sacred things? I had got myself so enmeshed in my passion for low alto, without considering that they aren't around anymore" (Avinis 1997:154).

If Brahms was sometimes reluctant to stratify his melodic lines, he was also often reluctant to push his accompaniments wholly into the background. Gustav Jenner, who has the distinction of being Brahms's only real composition student, relates in his memoirs how Brahms was "not one to be impressed by . . . complicated or 'atmospheric' accompaniments" ([1905] 1990:199). Speaking of vocal music, Jenner recalls Brahms's disdain for composers hiding a "pitiful, shabby" compositional idea behind the "sumptuous and glittering cloak" of a merely decorative accompaniment. Brahms instead "loved to elevate the accompaniment to a fully equal, even independent, element and sometimes to move it canonically in relation to the voice" ([1905] 1990:199–200).

Given Brahms's apparent disdain for superficial accompaniments and for his contemporaries' tendency to underplay accompaniments, it is not surprising that Max Graf's first-hand account of Brahms's manner of accompanying singers emphasizes his tendency to elevate the piano part to an unusually prominent role:

Brahms never accompanied in the manner to which we are accustomed today [1945]. Accompanists of great singers perform in the same manner as lackeys laying a carpet at the feet of their mistresses. They are in the background, obsequious and bending to the whims of the artist and never step forward to attract attention. But not Brahms . . . The singer was not the main feature, the song was important, and both singer and pianist worked toward the same goal . . . Brahms's accompaniments had a strong foundation of basses, even in sweet songs like the *Wiegenlied*, the accompaniment of which is usually sublimated and pampering. Brahms himself always used firmness in the basses . . . his hand was somewhat heavy. (Musgrave 2000:135–36)

Accounts such as these seem to indicate that Brahms had ideals of sonority and dynamic balance that were altogether different from the kind of textural clarity being espoused by late nineteenth-century writers on piano

Current Musicology

Example 5: Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, op. 24, Variation 13, mm. 1–6 (1872).

Var. 13
Largamente, ma non più

f *espress.*

4

f

performance and composition. Though the quotes from Brahms and his acquaintances are not specifically concerned with solo piano music, they do give some idea of his general attitude towards the relationship between melody and accompaniment. Moreover, his piano music provides countless examples of the kind of writing for the instrument expressly discouraged by late nineteenth-century piano treatises. One frequently finds, for example, close-positioned chords in the lower registers, stepwise motion in the middle to lower registers where change of pedal at each semitone is not possible, and textures where the boundaries separating melodic lines from the accompaniment are somewhat blurred.

One of the most striking examples of Brahms's use of close-positioned chords in the lower register to create a murky, rumbling effect can be found in variation 13 of the Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, op. 24 (example 5). In this variation, the closely spaced chordal texture remains fixed primarily in the register around and below middle C. In particular, the tight spacing of the left hand's rolled chords, set in the bottom octaves of the piano, results in a menacing rumble that is almost more noise than harmony. Furthermore, the timbre of the upper melodic voice, because of its low range and proximity to the lower chord members, does not have the distinctive, piercing quality that might distinguish it from the rest of the texture, were it set in a higher register. The overall balance is decidedly weighted towards the bottom, especially because of Brahms's doublings. The melodic line is reinforced not by octave doubling, but rather by a single harmonic tone, usually a sixth, whereas the bass voice, on the other hand, is doubled at the octave throughout. Finally, Brahms usually thickens the left

hand with inner chord members, further skewing the balance away from the melody. The result is an evocation of immense weight and gravity. This is precisely the kind of sonority that the treatises characterize as “harsh,” and one of many examples where Brahms sacrifices “purity of tone” to create a particularly “wild and gloomy” effect. Indeed, the intense expressivity of this exceptionally dark variation can be attributed to the pronounced “mingling of tones” that the treatises warn is inevitable with close-positioned chords in this register.⁸

An example discussed earlier, the opening of the C# Minor Capriccio, op. 76, no. 5 (example 2), also owes its intensely chaotic quality to the dense saturation of the lower register. In that case, another factor that ensures a blurring of the musical surface is the rapidly moving chromatic line, which, when combined with the pedal, inevitably results in sustained dissonant non-harmonic tones. This effect is diametrically opposed to the ideas advanced by Bukhovtsev and Schmitt, both of whom favor passagework that allows for a liberal use of the pedal to sustain consonances. Because of this, they recommend reserving non-harmonic tones for places where the pedal may be changed, particularly in the middle and lower portions of the piano. However, Brahms uses the diminished clarity of a low-lying chromatic line along with close spacing as a point of contrast, maximizing the effect of the transformation of these opening measures in their recapitulation. In the Capriccio, Brahms turns the “problem” of pedaled dissonances into a virtue.

By creating impenetrable sonic backgrounds that serve to mask thematic lines, Brahms defeats the clear division and hierarchization of melody and accompaniment. However, using overtone buildup and registral saturation is not the only means by which he hinders stratification of the melody. Another device he employs frequently is the fusion of melodic and subsidiary lines into a single strand, blurring their separation. One of the best examples of this technique is the B Minor Intermezzo, op. 119, no. 1 (example 6). As the opening chain of thirds gradually descends, it seems that we are hearing one distinct melodic thread. It is only as the piece continues that we are able to discern a top voice, separate from the accompanimental voice. Although the uppermost voice is maintained through the first sixteen measures as the primary thematic voice, it is continually merging with the secondary line beneath it. For example, in m. 4 the upper voice is quite clearly a separate thematic voice, but in the following measure it sinks to a B on the last sixteenth note. This final note is at the same time part of the continuing chain of thirds that comprises the secondary line, and it is stemmed upward and downward to show its double function. The two lines merge into one another again in mm. 7–8 and in mm. 11 and 13. The ambiguous number

Current Musicology

Example 6: Intermezzo in B Minor, op. 119, no. 1, mm. 1–17 (1893).

Adagio

6

12

rit.

p

Example 7: Intermezzo in B Minor, op. 119, no. 1, mm. 43–54 (1893).

in tempo

43

in tempo

dim.

p

49

of voices (one or two) is maintained throughout the sixteen measures that comprise the opening section. At some points the separation of the two voices in the right hand is quite clear, at other times it is dissolved. When the passage is revisited later in the piece (example 7), starting in m. 47 the descending chain of thirds has been embellished with triplets. The extra non-harmonic tones heighten the line's status as a true melody, though its function of filling out the harmony does not change.

The entangling of primary and secondary lines in the Intermezzo represents an altogether different aesthetic from the clear separation and hierarchization of simultaneous voices that Christiani promotes as an ideal. It is also different from the marked distancing of melody from accompaniment endorsed by all the treatises cited. Brahms was certainly aware of the difference; he uses it as a point of contrast in variations 1 and 2 of the Variations on an Original Theme in D Major, op. 21, no. 1. As the composer's stemming indicates in variation 1 (example 8), the melody is embedded within the accompanying filigree from which it emanates. This variation has a great deal in common with the *più lento* in the B Minor Ballade. The melody is an inner voice and is embedded within the accompanimental figure, it is confined to a low tessitura and narrow overall compass, and Brahms instructs the pianist to play *pianissimo* with pedal. One can readily imagine that the marking "senza troppo marcare la melodia" is also appropriate for this variation. Variation 2 (example 9) is derived from variation 1, but here the right hand's melody is isolated from the accompaniment and set above it. The melody is further distinguished by its escape from registral confinement, as it moves out from behind the covering shadow of its accompaniment. Set high up into the treble register, it can penetrate through the texture more distinctly. Thus, Brahms creates contrast between the two variations through an initial entangling of melody and accompaniment followed by a marked delineation of these elements.

The figurations in the first variation of Brahms's op. 21, no. 1, and in the Intermezzo, op. 119, no. 1, tread a thin line between melodic foreground and harmonic backdrop. They are not simple harmonic filler creating a lush background from which the thematic notes are easily distinguished, but rather exemplify Brahms's penchant for blurring the distinction between the melodic notes of the line and the harmonic notes. These examples call to mind Jenner's comments about Brahms's aversion to merely decorative filigree, cited above. They also present a stark contrast to the treatises by Schmitt and Bukhovtsev, which idealize subservient and clear harmonic figuration.

Current Musicology

Example 8: Variations on an Original Theme in D Major, op. 21, no. 1, Variation 1, mm. 19–27 (1860).

Var. 1

molto piano e legato

pp teneramente

col Pedale

24

1.

Example 9: Variations on an Original Theme in D Major, op. 21, no. 1, Variation 2, mm. 37–43 (1860).

Più moto

p espressivo

Rejection of Modern Instruments in Recent Scholarship

One of the central concerns of performers who play historical pianos has been the question of balance and pedaling, and the possible relation of these issues to the more transparent sound of various pianos built in the first half of the nineteenth century as compared to modern pianos.⁹ Referring to a recording of Beethoven sonatas for cello and piano made by Malcolm Bilson and Anner Bylisma (1992), Bernard Sherman concludes that, “The period instruments solve balance problems that modern pianos create in these works, making it clear that Beethoven would have written the piano parts differently for a modern grand” (1997:313). The basic tone is clearer and decays more quickly on any piano from the first half of the nineteenth century than on the modern piano, albeit to varying degrees. Because of this difference, performers using period pianos have pointed to numerous examples where accompaniments that on a modern piano threaten to create

a confusing mass of sound and obscure the melody present no such problem on a period piano, and Sherman's remark epitomizes this attitude. The references to an older polyphonic keyboard style (no longer in use because of problems of textural clarity) in the treatises cited above strongly support the belief that the greater resonance and sustain of later nineteenth-century pianos did indeed force many composers to reconsider their treatment of register and chord spacing in piano music.

The basic premise that Brahms was writing piano textures designed specifically for lighter pre-modern instruments has dominated approaches to performance practice scholarship for his piano music as well. Scholars have maintained that Brahms's handling of the bass register was largely determined by his "strong leanings" (Cai 1989:59) toward the more conservative mid-century Viennese pianos, and therefore "need[s] to be understood in respect to [their] capabilities" (Cai 1989:62). Brahms himself owned a piano by Johann Baptist Streicher (built around 1868), given to him in 1872 and which he kept in his Vienna flat until the end of his life. This piano, like pianos from the first half of the century, did not have the cross-stringing, one-piece cast-iron frame or the heavy, rigid case found on Steinway-type pianos from the early 1860s to the present day, and so Brahms's Streicher would have had a quicker decay and a more transparent tone than a modern instrument.

Thus, several writers maintain that Brahms's predilection for particularly low bass writing and thickly scored accompaniments is proof of his preference for more transparent "conservative" pianos of the nineteenth century, like the Streicher. Scholars have emphasized the difference between straight and cross-strung pianos because of the latter's vastly more complex overtone pattern in the lower registers. For Robert Winter, the difference is so crucial as to essentially disqualify cross-strung instruments as "appropriate" instruments for Brahms's piano music:

The introduction of cross- or overstringing in the 1850s led to characteristics of the piano bass that are equally at cross-purposes with Romantic piano literature. On a piano where many tones generally sound at once, the distinctness of individual tones is the tradeoff for greater sustaining power. (1990:37)

Winter goes so far as to argue that the technical innovations of the Steinway piano, emulated to varying degrees by rival piano makers until their eventual standardization in the early decades of the twentieth century, represent a "fatal blow" to the fundamental aesthetic premises of nineteenth-century piano works. Winter asks, "How . . . can we celebrate the varieties of color in nineteenth-century piano music when the instruments themselves have

Current Musicology

been purged of so much of that color?" (1990:30). Numerous other scholars have likewise presumed that Brahms's thickly-written piano textures demand the clarity offered by performance on straight-strung instruments. Edwin Good, for example, writes,

On an instrument like the Streicher, Brahms's music comes cleaner and clearer, the thick textures we associate with his work, the sometimes muddy chords in the bass and the occasionally woolly sonorities, lightened. Those textures, then, are not a fault of Brahms's piano composition. (2001:239)

A similar conclusion is drawn by Cai:

One of the most common complaints about Brahms's music . . . concerns the thickness or "muddiness" of Brahms's bass parts . . . However, the sound of the conservative German or Austrian piano from the second half of the nineteenth century supports the conclusion that this particular concern may not have existed for Brahms. (1989:67)

Robert Pascall also invokes this ideology in reference to Brahms's chamber music for piano:

It is sometimes claimed that Brahms's piano parts in his chamber music works are over-written; but this judgment, as we can now appreciate, is a modern error. (1991:10)

Thus, these writers agree that to perform Brahms's piano music on the modern grand is to misrepresent it. In Winter's words,

Convincing performances of many of the late character pieces face serious obstacles on our modern instrument, for example, the opening of one of the most atmospheric, Brahms's Intermezzo in E \flat minor, op. 118, no. 6. No modern pianist can hope to replicate Brahms's distant, disembodied (*but dear!*) bass response to the plaintive solo opening. (1990:33, emphasis added)

Instead, we should use instruments that represent "the sound quality he was most used to and preferred" (1990:9), a "sound ideal clearly different from the one now accepted in the twentieth century" (Cai 1989:58).

All of the arguments cited here rest on the assumption that Brahms preferred textural clarity, and specifically, that he preferred a clearly audible melody against the background accompaniment. For instance, Cai writes, "The textures Brahms chooses for the late piano pieces . . . reveal his clarity of intent to produce a defined, balanced piano sound" (1989:62). A "defined, balanced" texture, in this context, is one that is balanced so all parts are easily

intelligible, and the subsidiary, accompanimental parts do not interfere with the projection of the main melodic lines. For Cai, the clear delineation of melodic material is an a priori objective behind Brahms's piano writing. She asserts that "the problem of delineating [Brahms's] middle-range melodies lies not just with the pianist," but with the modern piano:

On the pianos of Brahms's time . . . the distinctive middle range—particularly around and below middle C—sounds full, mellow, and prominent, and it easily dominates the treble and bass ranges. Brahms undoubtedly heard this middle area as the richest on the piano, and therefore chose to exploit it in his piano pieces. (1989:66)

By contrast, my contention is that Brahms often sets melodies in this register precisely because he does not want them delineated from the accompaniment, but rather he intends for them to sound covered, muted, or "veiled." In the examples cited above, I have argued that the low tessitura is part of a constellation of compositional devices through which he undermines delineation and hierarchization of the musical texture, creating a special kind of ambiguity. The assertion that Brahms used tenor-range melodies such as those encountered in the C# Minor Capriccio and variation 13 from op. 24 because he believed this was the register in which they project most clearly is dubious, and it misinterprets the essential character of these works. In the former case, were the pianist to thin out the accompaniment in the opening measures and project the melodic line, he or she would eradicate the contrast between the initially ambiguous textures and their subsequent clarification, upon which the dramatic thrust of the work is founded. In the B Minor Ballade he has explicitly directed the pianist not to project one of these tenor range melodies. However, if one is sensitive to the way Brahms uses register, chord-spacing, and the overall density of the accompaniment, one can perceive where he desires a transparent texture and where he does not, even in the absence of explicit directions.

The Problem of Overestimating the Relationship between Music and Instrument

Paradoxically, though these performance practice scholars attempt to understand Brahms's music from an aesthetic viewpoint not based on the modern piano, they reinforce the very same premises of the late nineteenth-century compositional/performance treatises cited above—treatises which express new attitudes towards piano music that emerged *because* of the modern piano. Modern performance practice scholars, like the late nineteenth-century treatise writers, take for granted clarity of texture and

delineation of melody as necessary artistic aims. These scholars also rely on the presumption that Brahms's dense saturation of the lower register and seemingly "overwritten" accompaniments create an intolerable and inartistic mass of noise on the modern piano. At the same time, but without any supporting documentary evidence, they accept the assumption that Brahms himself held the same view, and that he thus did not intend performance on modern-type pianos—for supposedly we can be sure he never would have composed in this way for such an instrument. This stance is even more restrictive than that of the treatises, which at least allow that with such writing a composer might be after a certain effect, and if "contrary to the highest artistic claims, a certain mist-like, cloudy, or indefinite effect is to be produced" (Bukhovtsev 1897:36). The modern presumptions preclude the possibility that Brahms, instead of seeing the reduced clarity of the modern piano as a problem, used it as an opportunity to explore a new and unique kind of expressive ambiguity.

This is not to say that Brahms's use of such textures was specifically inspired by the modern piano. The examples of Brahms's "veiled" piano aesthetic referred to in this article span almost four decades, from the 1854 *Ballades*, op. 10, to the 1893 *Klavierstücke*, op. 119. The continuities in his piano aesthetics and his persistent use of analogous textural devices across decades which saw major changes in piano design suggest that we should not interpret the relationship between his music and the changing instrument as a rigid one-to-one relationship. The *Ballades*, op. 10, date from 1854 and it would be roughly another decade before the Steinway piano, with its over-strung bass strings and one-piece cast-iron frame achieved widespread success across Europe. However, by the time the *Capriccio*, op. 76, was composed in 1878, the Steinway piano had become well established. By then, many of Europe's most important piano-making firms, including the Bechstein firm in Berlin and the Bösendorfer firm in Vienna, were also making over-strung pianos with heavy cast-iron frames. Brahms's idiosyncratic writing for the instrument is already present in his earlier works that predate the modern piano. It does not necessarily follow from this, however, that the style established in earlier works was compromised by later technological developments in piano design.

Brahms, like all pianists who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century, played on an enormous variety of instruments.¹⁰ It is well known that he performed for many years on lighter, straight-strung instruments like the *Streicher* that he owned, and that he expressed admiration for those instruments (Avins 2003:11–16).¹¹ Nevertheless, as Styra Avins has pointed out, Brahms's letters reveal nothing but admiration for the modern Steinways and Bechsteins that appeared later in his life. In fact, he made efforts on nu-

merous occasions to secure either one or the other for public performances (Avins 1997:587–88, 753–54). Rather than suggesting Brahms wrote for the specific characteristics of a particular piano, we should understand that his writing was more generally directed towards his idealized concept of artistic piano playing. This is an important distinction that allows for the composer's lifelong assimilation of a rich variety of musical experiences into a complex composite aesthetic conception. This composite concept was entirely fluid and expanded over time, influenced by experiences with new piano designs as well as an awareness of the accomplishments of new and original keyboard artists. By adapting this attitude we can appreciate the flexibility of Brahms's aesthetics against the background of the changing piano.

Conclusion

Analysis of Brahms's music has recently focused on a number of different types of ambiguity.¹² The Brahms analytical literature has primarily discussed harmonic, metrical, formal/structural, and motivic ambiguity. This article is concerned with still another type of ambiguity found in Brahms's music, which I have called "textural ambiguity." One of the central recurring themes in the analytical literature is Brahms's obscuring of various fundamental compositional frameworks. For example, Walter Frisch, in his article on shifting bar lines in Brahms's chamber music, identifies the establishment of a basic motive whose true metrical framework is obscured through a process of displacement, with the result that "even the most astute listener will become utterly disoriented." Frisch describes such passages as containing "an ambiguity between notated and perceived meter" and points out that the listener without a score or previous knowledge of the music will likely misinterpret the true metrical context (1990:140–47).¹³

Attention to processes of concealment is characteristic of Brahms analysis in other areas as well. Scholars have commented on Brahms's obscuring of tonal structure through the avoidance of root-position tonic chords.¹⁴ The ambiguity under discussion in these articles arises from Brahms's concealment of the harmonic orientation by withholding the stabilizing tonic chord. Within the Schenkerian literature, Allen Cadwallader has focused on what Schenker called "concealed motivic repetition," identifying note successions that "create the impression of a motive, but one which appears incongruous or indistinct in the prevailing harmonic/linear context" (1988:59). Cadwallader attributes ambiguity in Brahms's music to the fact that "components of any given harmonic/contrapuntal framework . . . are not always clearly articulated. On the contrary, they are sometimes concealed by conflicting characteristics" (1988:60).

My remarks on Brahms's subversion of the boundaries between melody and accompaniment, and his blurring of the separation of individual voices are entirely congruous with prevailing characterizations of formal, metrical, and harmonic ambiguity, suggesting a unifying aesthetic outlook inherent in numerous aspects of Brahms's compositional style. The ambiguity I have focused on arises in textures that resist a clear separation into layers of foreground (melody) and background (accompaniment), and passages where the identity of separate voices is obscured through continual entangling and disentangling. My characterization of textural ambiguity, like the analytical works cited above, recognizes a challenge extended by Brahms to the listener—a challenge that provides important clues to Brahms's expectations of his audience.

Awareness of textural ambiguity is a critical issue that performers of Brahms's music must confront, and therefore it is vital to the study of performance practice. Its absence in the performance practice literature to date has led scholars to misinterpret the character of certain works and to make untenable claims about Brahms's expectations regarding the instrument. This type of misunderstanding can result when historically informed performance is pursued in a way that is too partisan. It should not be the overriding goal of performance study to disqualify modern instruments at all costs, but rather to use documentary evidence and experience with period instruments to engage in more nuanced ways with the aesthetics and style of a given composer or work.

Notes

1. See, for example, Cai (1989), Pascall (1991), and Winter (1990).
2. For comprehensive histories of piano making in the nineteenth century and beyond, see Ehrlich (1990) and Good (2001).
3. This direction appears at m. 47, also marked "più lento." When this material is recapitulated at m. 135, Brahms writes "mezza voce," which is another way of telling the performer to restrain projection of the theme.
4. The work was composed in 1854, a particularly painful and turbulent year for Brahms because of Robert Schumann's attempted suicide and subsequent removal to an asylum at Endenich. That year also marks Brahms's admission of hopeless love for Clara Schumann in a letter to Joseph Joachim. This letter is published in Avins (1997:48).
5. This characterization comes from Ethel Smyth's famous recollection of Brahms at the piano: "Lifting a submerged theme out of a tangle of music he used jokingly to ask us to admire the gentle sonority of his 'tenor thumb'" (Smyth 1919, 1:266, quoted in Cai 1989:62).
6. Christiani was a student of Franz Liszt.
7. My information on this affair is drawn from Avins (2003:30–34). See also Avins (1997:674–78).
8. Other examples of Brahms exploiting the murky quality of the lower register to great

effect include the Rhapsody in B Minor, op. 79, no. 1, and the Rhapsody in E \flat Major, op. 119, no. 4.

9. See, for example, Bernard Sherman's interview with Malcolm Bilson (Sherman 1997:297–314).

10. For a comprehensive overview of the pianos Brahms played on during his lifetime, see Bozarth and Brady (1990).

11. In an 1873 letter to Adolf Schubring, Brahms confessed, "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" (quoted in Avins 2003:13).

12. Discussions of metrical ambiguity in Brahms's music include Fankhauser (1998), Smith (1994), Epstein (1990), and Frisch (1990). For discussions of formal ambiguity, see Dunsby (1981). Studies focused on harmonic ambiguity include Smith (1997), Dubiel (1994), Cadwallader (1988), and Graybill (1988). Studies that deal with a combination of these topics include Lewin (1981) and Rink (1999). Additional pertinent studies are Agawu (1994), Jordan and Kafalenos (1989), and Webster (2001).

13. Frisch credits Schoenberg as the first critic to call attention to such ambiguities.

14. Investigations of this aspect of Brahms's style in the C Major Capriccio, op. 76, no. 8, (a work that does not contain a single root position C Major chord until the final harmony) include Lewin (1981) and McClelland (2004). See also Brahms's Intermezzo in B \flat Major, op. 76, no. 4, for another example of a work where Brahms avoids a root-position tonic chord until the final measure.

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