In the summer of 1890, Brahms said to his friend Eusebius Mandyczewski:

I’ve been tormenting myself for a long time with all kinds of things, a symphony, chamber music and other stuff, and nothing will come of it....I’m just not going to do anymore. My whole life I’ve been a hard worker; now for once I’m going to be good and lazy!

(Swafford, 1997: 566)

At the time, he was working on the G Major String Quintet and probably thought the last gypsy-style movement would be a pleasant farewell. He soon changed his mind, however, possibly encouraged by positive reception, befriending a talented and attractive singer, Alice Barbi, or being stunned by clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld, whom he listened to in Meiningen in January of 1891. That summer in Ischl, he composed the Clarinet Trio, Op. 114 and the Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115 for Mühlfeld, both works containing shifts between passion and the melancholy of an old man in retrospect. Brahms took part in the performances in November, which once again brought great success (Swafford:576). Another reversal of mood came in December, when he offered the four-hand version of the String Quintet and announced: ‘The time has come for you to say goodbye to any further compositions of mine’ (Musgrave, 1985: 241). In fact, after the death of his beloved friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg in January, and his sister in June 1892, Brahms began to age rapidly and there was a decline in vitality as well as the overwhelming urge to create. He informed Clara, as he headed to Bad Ischl after his fifty-ninth birthday, that from then
on, he would be composing for himself alone (Swafford: 578). This is the frame of mind with which Brahms started to compose his late piano miniatures, Opuses 116-119, the last intimate monologues written for his favourite instrument, in fact the only one with which he felt fully at home, as he once wrote to Clara Schumann (Dunsby, 1987).

The late miniatures, twenty pieces in all, are romantic character pieces carrying on the tradition of Schumann and Chopin, but with many original characteristics, reflecting Brahms’s late style and highly experimental approach. The collections are not cycles (with the possible exception of Op. 116, as suggested by Dunsby, 1983) and do not carry literary implications (except for Op. 117) as many of Schumann’s pieces. At the same time, they are more progressive and much more compact than many of Chopin’s shorter piano works. Brahms’s principles of organic unity, motivic economy, tonal fluidity but ambiguity, increasing potency of ideas, and a concision of structure, with freedom and richness of thought is clearly present in all of them. Brahms seems to be applying a concept of his favourite poet, Goethe, to music: the idea that all organic life consists of transformations of a single basic substance (Urstoff), through procedures such as metamorphosis, evolution, and variation (Goethe, 1790). Similarly Brahms created whole pieces, and even whole opuses (as in the case of Op. 116 and 117), from basic motivic material or themes consisting of a few notes, further refining a process handed down from Beethoven, with the help of his own developing variation technique. He stressed the significance of organicism in works, requesting from his students that they analyse the relationship between part and whole in works by Classical masters (Notley, 1993: 114) and take this into consideration when composing. This was a principle which he applied to his own works, not least in the late miniatures. No matter how unexpected the melodic shifts or ambiguous the harmonies and rhythms, organic unity and logical structure are always present.

Although they have a strongly conventional ternary form, usually with two contrasting
ideas, the pieces are innovative in the way Brahms treats these ideas in each piece, with unexpected departures and returns. Sometimes the second idea grows from the first (119/3, 117/2) or there may be more than two themes (119/4). The contrasting ideas do not stand alone, but are inter-connected by various elements. The handling of ternary structure differs from piece to piece, producing combinations with variation, rounded binary and sonata form. Thus the miniatures are highly condensed works containing elements of large-scale structure and harmonic processes.

Bozarth (1990: 377) states that ‘One must view the young Brahms not as a composer of instrumental music who occasionally wrote songs, but rather as a tone-poet whose lyric muse found expression principally through song, both with and without words.’ This is also true of the old Brahms, and the late miniatures are perfect examples. Although written for the piano, the pieces carry the idea of a song, with the principle of melody and accompaniment, reflecting Brahms’s fondness of both folk song and other vocal genres. The melody is mostly confined to inner voices in the middle register, reminiscent in tone colour of the contemporaneous clarinet pieces. It can also be considered a manifestation of Brahms’s instrumental preferences, as he especially liked the cello and viola, as well as the alto voice, thus favouring the corresponding register of the piano. In fact, pianists at the time had dubbed Brahms’s thumbs his ‘oboe fingers’ or referred to them as ‘tenor thumbs’ due to the abundance of melodies confined to the middle voices, which would be articulated by these fingers (Cai, 1986: 415).

Both technically and musically demanding, the miniatures are the ultimate synthesis of Brahms’s earlier compositional techniques, bringing together traditional elements of harmony and form, and revitalizing them with romantic ideas and even more progressive characters such as extreme dissonance and harmonic ambiguity. There is a striking prominence of the ‘third,’ thematically, harmonically (shifting between major and minor third), texturally (doubling for
orchestral effect) and in tonal relationships, within a piece and across whole opuses. This also manifests itself as chains of descending thirds, both as thematic material (as in Op. 119/1) and as tonalities (as in Op. 118/6). This preoccupation with thirds appeared in the very first works of Brahms (Piano Sonatas No. 1 and 3), and continued throughout his life, as in the Piano Concerto No. 1, the Fourth Symphony, and the Four Serious Songs. Latham (Musgrave, 1985:390) suggests that it may have been used to represent various events such as moonlight (as in the lied Mondenschein Op. 85/2) or death (Serious Songs) or possibly to allude to major changes in his life. The late piano miniatures are his last experiments with pianistic textures, having orchestral implications, much like the Handel Variations. Perhaps the use of the ‘third’ in this case implies an accumulation of all aspects of his compositional life: the architectural, the contrapuntal, and the lyrical. The pieces also bring together all aspects of his personality and character: logic, hindsight, foresight, creativity, passion, and melancholy. Their highly reflective quality coincides with the retrospective period in his life, when he seemed to sense that the end was coming and felt the need to say his last words.

After the piano miniatures, Brahms returned to the clarinet, composing the two Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120, published in 1894, the same year as the 49 Deutsche Volkslieder, which were his arrangements of beloved German folk songs with piano accompaniment. The Volkslieder marked another return to his youth, as the last of the songs was one he had included in his Op. 1 Piano Sonata, leading to his famous remark to Clara: ‘It ought to represent the snake which bites its own tail, that is to say, to express symbolically that the tale is told, the circle is closed’ (Swafford: 596). 1895 was the first year since 1872 that Brahms did not publish anything. He may have been working on the Chorale Preludes Op. 122, which were published posthumously. The Four Serious Songs, Op. 121, which ‘extended the Lied tradition to accommodate the
searching ethical idealism previously explored in his sacred choral works’ (MacDonald, 1990: 371), were completed in May 1896 and became the last works to be published during his lifetime.

The following chapters examine the late miniatures, with the exclusion of Op. 116, as Dunsby (1983), Rink (1995) and others have already produced extensive studies about its ‘multi-piece’ identity. (Further research (Cai, 1986: 269) has revealed that there were only five pieces in October 1892, and Brahms had mentioned publishing three and then two, adding numbers 1 and 7 later, which suggests that the collection had not really started out as a cycle). The pieces have been analysed in terms of form, motivic content and tonal structure, with the hope of shedding some light on their relevance to and significance in Brahms’s output, and on any kind of unity which may link the pieces, both locally, and across opuses. The study, in turn, aims to help performance practice, and to suggest possible answers to related questions.
Chapter 2

Drei Intermezzi Op. 117
‘Three Lullabies for my Sorrows’

The title ‘Intermezzo,’ previously applied to movements before or midway between other parts of a suite, had acquired a different meaning in the 19th century. They were now short pieces of individual character. Schumann had used this title for a connecting movement (as in the Op. 11 Piano Sonata) and for independent pieces (Op. 4). Brahms seems to have done the same at the beginning of his compositional life, with the Rückblick Intermezzo movement in his Op. 5 Piano Sonata, and the 2nd movement of his Op. 25 Piano Quartet, a graceful, medium-tempo inner movement with ABA-coda pattern, also labelled Intermezzo. The term had an ambiguous meaning in the Op. 10 Ballades, as the third is called an Intermezzo, acting both as an independent piece and as a connection. In Op. 76 and 116, Brahms used the title with similar implications, as they were independent character pieces, but provided contrast by being placed between the more passionate Capricci. In Op. 117, the genre seems to have acquired a more independent identity.

The Op. 117 Intermezzi date from Brahms’s 1892 summer in Bad Ischl, a time when he was losing one by one, those dearest to him. Although it is speculated that the pieces could have been sketched earlier in his life, the death of his sister and his especially close friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, the fatal illnesses of Hans von Bülow and Theodor Billroth, tension in his relationship with Clara Schumann, together with his advancing age, must all have had an effect on the completion of such sorrowful and reflective monologues. It is no wonder that Brahms described them as ‘Drei Wiegenlieder meiner Schmerzen’ (Three Lullabies for my Sorrows), and
included at the beginning of No. 1 an inscription of Herder’s translation of the Scottish folk poem *Lady Anne Bothwell’s Lament*. The lines Brahms quotes, “Schlaf sanft, mein Kind” (Sleep softly, my child) are not typical of the poem as a whole. It actually tells the story of an abandoned and grievous mother, who sings her sorrows to her baby. Both Bozarth (1990:376-7) and Parmé (1997:376) argue that No. 2 is a continuation of the same poem (Herder’s *Lullaby of an Abandoned Mother*), and that No. 3 is written to *Herzweh* (Heart-sore), which can be read as the culmination of the abandoned mother’s grief. Bozarth states that the C# minor Intermezzo can be shown to be informed by the structure and emotional content of Herder’s translation of this Scottish love-lament. If this is indeed true, it verifies that the three pieces should be played together, and sheds light on why they are motivically, tonally, texturally and formally so closely related.

The only known sketching of Brahms’s piano miniatures is the page with the Op. 117 pieces on it, and it is also the only manuscript to contain a complete opus of the late piano pieces (Cai, 1986: 123). The sketch page shows an evolution of thought from the main theme of No. 3 to the Section B theme of No. 2 which, enharmonically, are actually in the same key (Cai: 268). This suggests that the third Intermezzo was sketched before the second. This makes it more likely that No. 2 and 3 were not literal continuations of Herder’s poems as suggested by Bozarth, but maybe only inspired by their moods. Brahms had said that he had written Op. 116 and 117 due to the abundance of women pianists in Ischl who would play them, including Ilona Eibenschütz (Avins, 1997: 693), but without doubt, they were also written with Clara Schumann in mind. Brahms sent Op. 117 to her with a letter in October, 1892, and she responded that the third had no nationalistic colouring, and asked “is it Scottish?” (Cai: 174). Brahms’s interest in Scottish folk poems and songs had inspired him almost forty years previously, in the finale of his Op. 1 Piano Sonata, and the Op. 10 ‘Edward’ Ballade, No. 1, which he also set as a sophisticated
art song for alto and tenor in 1877. Fiske (1968:1110) argues that the first Intermezzo of Op. 117 was actually the third instance in Brahms’s career when he changed into piano music, what he had begun as a Scottish Volkslied. This piece was a particular favourite and he is reported to have played it frequently for close friends (Niemann, 1946: 241).

Inspiration from a common source and being composed at the same time are not the only aspects which tie together the three Intermezzi. They also exhibit close tonal and motivic relationships and the central one seems to act as a unifying bridge with its juxtaposition of textures from each (as examined in Fig. 1). Numbers 1 and 3 have similar textures, with themes confined to inner voices accompanied by repeated pedal notes, and presented also in bare octaves. In fact, the third Intermezzo has a ballad-like character, beginning somberly and ‘sotto voce,’ the first hint of harmony coming in the fourth bar. The initial presentation of a theme in bare octaves as in No. 3 is also found in the first of the *Four Serious Songs*, Op. 121, the penultimate works of the composer, completed in 1896, inspired by Clara’s last fatal illness (Ex. 1). With its serious and pensive character, the C-sharp minor Intermezzo may have foreshadowed these last profound songs, with their premonitions of death and testaments of the faith in love and humanity.

These textures appear in No. 2 to a lesser degree, but its initial theme is closely related to the second theme of No. 3, with chords presented horizontally while appoggiaturas resolve over short bass notes. However, there is a consonance of bass and melody in the former, but dissonance in the latter one. This dissonance is instead a feature of the second theme of No. 2, which is related tonally, texturally and thematically to the initial theme of No. 3. An especially interesting tonal relationship is the use of the minor subdominant (A flat minor) at the end of the first section in No.1, and the modulation of the main theme to the minor dominant (G sharp minor) in No.3. Two such Brahmsian processes connect these Intermezzi through the appearance of a pair of keys which are enharmonically identical.

Brahms treats ternary form differently in each piece. The first one has a relatively straightforward ternary structure (as shown in Fig. 2), while No.2 is actually a miniature modified-sonata movement, with its second theme stated first in the relative major and then recapitulated in the tonic (shown in Fig. 3). However, Brahms does not carry out the full expectations of a sonata movement, as the first theme reappears first in the subdominant, not in the tonic, and a full V-I cadence is delayed until the return of the second theme. The piece does not exhibit the highly contrasting sectional character of sonata thinking, due to the motivic connections between the two themes, and the gradual transitions from one section to another by means of subtle harmonic, rhythmic and temporal processes. The last section, where the initial theme is finally resolved in the tonic over a dominant pedal, also acts as a coda by bringing together both themes and unifying the piece. The coda of No.1 functions in a similar way, acting as a counterbalance to the initial 4-bar transition, giving final meaning to the subdominant and creating symmetry, as well as a feeling of conclusion (Fig. 2). The coda of No. 3 is actually another version of the refrain, but it also summarizes a previous large-scale harmonic process (namely the modulation to G-sharp minor through A-sharp and D-sharp major, and eventual
cadence into the tonic), and through repetition of a motive from the A section over a changing bass, it creates tension and hence enhances the final tonic resolution (see Fig. 4).

The third Intermezzo is original in its handling of a ternary from, as each section itself has a binary structure (as shown in Fig. 4). In fact, each sub-section is repeated, and they are symmetrical in number of bars. The central section has a rounded-binary form, amounting to 60 bars with repeats, which balances the two outer A sections. This middle section in a third-related key, A major, is distinctly more chromatic and developmental than the outer sections, bearing minor inflections due to the C and F naturals. The E-sharps imply submediant harmony (F-sharp minor) locally, and the subdominant on a larger scale, a key of structural importance in the A section. The two refrains have summarizing functions as stated above, while the transition prepares the return of the A section, not only in character, but also harmonically and structurally, with its two mysterious 3-bar phrases, foreshadowing the 6-bar extended phrase and the coda in the next section.

Phrase structures vary among the three pieces. No. 1 has 4-bar units, while No. 3 has 5-bar phrases. The second has irregular phrase lengths in the A sections, the first period being 9 bars, followed by another 13 bars, leading to the second theme. This seems to go along with the harmonic instability and the developmental character of the initial theme, as the second, more stable theme (B section) consists of 4-bar phrases. This symmetry is not found in the coda however, where the return of the second theme transforms into a continuous passage of 13 bars. Brahms uses phrase extensions at significant moments in the pieces, such as the 5-bar phrase through use of hemiola at the end of the middle section of No. 1, and the 6-bar phrases in No. 3, at the climax towards the end (bar 91, which actually reinforces the modulation into the minor dominant) and at the coda, where it allows for the new harmonic progression (very different from its first appearance before the B section), and an authentically perfect cadence. The latter
extensions seem to release accumulated tension, but at the same time, create more by causing imbalance and counterbalance, delaying the final cadence in the tonic key.

Brahms’s characteristic technique of transferring accents to the weak parts of the bar dominate these pieces as well. If one does not see the score, it is difficult to judge which beat numbers 2 and 3 start on, and even more difficult to guess that they do not start on the first beat. This is also the case for the central section of No.1. Here, the right hand moves in 3/4, the left in 6/8, and the fourth beat contains both agogic and dynamic accent. Brahms causes displacement of the first beat by emphasizing the fourth, transcending the folk-like quality of the music (Cai, 1986:388). New harmonies in Section A enter early, one beat before the beginning of the bars, and late on beat 2 in Section B. Brahms creates tension and hence generates forward motion through this metric and rhythmic ambiguity. The best example is perhaps the central section of the third Intermezzo, where the syncopated beginning of the line with a semi-quaver upbeat, meets with its bass in the first quaver of the next bar. Important cadences are either placed on weak parts of the bar (for example, final tonic resolution of No. 2 coming on the third beat), or elided immediately with successive new phrases of modulatory character. An example of the latter process is found in No.3, at the end of bar 20, where the first cadence into the tonic, an unstable plagal one at that, merges on the last quaver of the bar with another statement of the initial theme, this time with subdominant harmony.

Another common feature found in all three Intermezzi is the repetition or imitation of a theme in a different register. In No. 1, imitation in different registers occurs in both sections, and at the return of the ‘A’ section, the theme is actually divided between the two hands. Change of register also includes a varied repeat, as in bars 50-51, where a canon occurs at a distance of two quavers. Similar imitation occurs in the B sections of No. 2. In the central section of the third Intermezzo, the chord progressions are distributed up and down the keyboard with the theme
being stated in octave displacements.

The three pieces have very similar tempo markings, as each is basically and *Andante*, with minor variations, which seem to imply slight differences in character rather than actual changes in speed. A common pulse runs through and links all of them, as all move by the quaver, with the exception of the central sections of 1 and 3, which move by the crotchet, but this is yet another unifying factor. At transitional or cadential points within the pieces, Brahms alters this rhythmic pulse, creating agogic accent usually through augmentation, or by introducing hemiolas. This process both announces a significant formal or harmonic event, such as a new section or a final cadence, or creates a smooth transition by introducing the new pulse. Brahms does the opposite of this in the third piece with the use of *fermatas*, which actually take away any feeling of a pulse, especially when preceded by a *ritardando* as in the 6-bar transition. The fermatas temporarily arrest motion and add to the ambiguity of the succeeding metres.

Op.117 is an example of Brahms’s techniques in creating unity out of diversity. Although each Intermezzo has individual traits and experiments with ternary form in a different way, all have a song-like character (inspired by the lullaby idea), and are linked in so many other ways that it is almost impossible not to consider the opus a ‘multi-piece,’ as Dunsby (1983) characterized the seven *Fantasien*, Op. 116.
Chapter 3

Op. 118

Which Johannes, Brahms or Kreisler?

Johannes Kreisler: “They [artists] carry their chosen lady in their hearts and wish only to sing, write poetry, and to paint for her….”
From Kater Murr by E. T. A. Hoffman

The Op. 118 Sechs Klavierstücke were the product of another summer in Bad Ischl, that of 1893. They were completed alongside four other pieces, the Op. 119, and published at the same time. In fact, Op. 118 No. 1 and Op. 119 No.1 were written on an exclusively different kind of paper, suggesting that Brahms had composed them consecutively or even contemplated pairing the two (Cai, 1986:13). Another interesting fact revealed from the holographs is that Op. 118 No. 6 begins on the same page where No. 3 ends, suggesting that the 4th and 5th pieces were put in at a later time (Cai: 53). Although Brahms was very meticulous about destroying any document which would reveal his speculations and compositional processes, Op. 118 is one of the few manuscripts which survives, showing his doubt until the end as to the titles of the pieces. He had prepared and inventory list of all the pieces for Op. 118 and 119, with a single title page bearing the name Fantasien für Pianoforte, then crossed it off along with the whole page (Cai: 60). After Clavierstücken, he seems to have finally settled on Klavierstücke. According to Kalbeck (1904-14:3/196), Brahms had rejected the title Phantasien for 118 and 119 because the concept did not fit the forms of a Ballade or a Rhapsody.

Both collections seem to have been composed with Clara Schumann in mind, since Brahms sent pieces to her as soon as they were completed, probably with the hope of stimulating and inspiring the aging woman, both musically and emotionally. We know that Op. 118 was a special favourite of Clara’s, as she played pieces from it for the composer on their last meeting in
September of 1895, which, according to her daughter Eugenie Schumann, made both glow with happiness (Swafford, 1997: 602). The miniatures could also very well have been inspired by Clara’s beautiful and talented pupil, Ilona Eibenschütz, who in fact premiered them in London in 1894 (Swafford: 587).

Op. 118 is a much more heterogeneous entity, including a Ballade and a Romanze alongside four Intermezzi, which although sharing the same title, are very different, both in their character and the way they handle ternary form. The pieces are sophisticated experiments in thematic transformation and developing variation, bearing Baroque traits and richer harmonic language. Although similarities in compositional techniques and motivic characteristics can be found among them, and the fact that the overall key scheme spans a tritone (from A to E-flat), with paired keys (1 and 2, 4 and 5), suggesting some sort of larger tonal structure, these miniatures seem to have been put together to form a balanced collection, rather than a multi-piece. Brahms himself had said of Op. 118 and 119 that ‘the people will certainly be able to ferret out their favourites’ (Brahms Briefe 12: 105) and they were rarely performed as complete opuses in his time.7

The collection opens with a passionate Intermezzo of improvisatory quality, different in character from the quiet ones of Op. 117. It is ambiguous in its opening tonality and assertive in its refusal to settle into the tonic key of A minor through a conventional cadence. The theme is a scalic segment (and hence should be called a motive rather than a theme), which Brahms manipulates in original and inverted forms, presenting it in augmentation at the final cadence (shown in Fig. 5). The B section looks forward to 20th century music, with the same notes presented as chords and as arpeggios. Thus, harmony becomes melody and vice versa. The piece has a rounded binary form, both sections being repeated, concluding with a coda which is
greater in length than the preceding sections. The coda, similar to Op. 117/2, carries motives from both sections and provides a medium for resolution of the continuous motion and tension generated through the chromaticism and the diminished harmonies. Tonal ambiguity is far from being resolved however, as there is once again no strong dominant-tonic motion. Instead, the cadence is a disguised plagal one into the tonic major, blurred by the diminished arpeggios. In contrast to the harmonic ambiguity, there is a certain structural symmetry, as the sections are equal in length, and the phrase lengths (although unsymmetrical) are consistent.

Judging from evidence provided by the manuscripts, although the second Intermezzo was not at first paired with the previous one (as they appear on different sheets), the fact that it is in the key of A major, the same key that concluded the first, is probably not a chance occurrence, and Brahms undoubtedly took this into account when he put them in order. As Dunsby has pointed out (1983:188), the piece starts with the melodic C-sharp which was the last note of No. 1, and moves to the first downbeat D, a tonal centre which had prolonged the underlying melodic resolution on E in No. 1 (bar 39 onwards). It also recalls the Intermezzo Op. 76/6 of 1879, which has a similar structure and the same keys, with a middle section in F-sharp minor. The earlier work, with a more closed form of 8-bar periods, concludes with a coda, containing material from the B section. The later one has 4 and 5-bar phrases, with a 3-bar transition back to the A section, which has a slight but significantly varied repeat, reaching a climactic note 2/3rds of the way through the piece. The opening is also very similar to Op. 116/2, the Intermezzo in A minor, with its theme consisting of a 3rd followed by a 6th and later an 8th, leading to a half-cadence at the end of 4 bars (Ex. 2).

Although this piece is more straightforward in its key than the first Intermezzo, a full sense of tonality is still obscured, as the few tonic chords in root position are placed on weak
beats or appear as unstable inversions, and the only stable cadences in the tonic key (themselves being the last part of a 2-bar hyper-measure) are found at the end of the two outer A sections.

Ex. 2 Opening bars of 116/2 and 118/2:

The Intermezzo is a very good example of the way Brahms generates a whole piece from a mere 3-note figure (consisting of thirds both vertically and horizontally), introduced as an upbeat onto the first bar, varying it by transposition and inversion to form both the melodic and harmonic basis through counterpoint (Fig. 6). This same motive provides the material for the canonic middle section, which has a rounded-binary form, much like Op. 117/3, but with more clearly defined subsections, both tonally and structurally. It reappears in original form in the bass in the central sub-sections of the A sections providing the basis for modulation. There is a strong sense of local and large-scale symmetry throughout the Intermezzo, and the outer sections are almost identical, except for the first subsection, which lacks the first 8-bar period and has two descending phrases rather than ascending ones, announcing the conclusion. In the central section, however, symmetry does not mean exact repetition, as the canon appears in three different versions, in the parallel major, with a reversal of parts, and tonally varied cadences. In the second F-sharp minor section, two melodies appear in double-counterpoint (bars 65-68) along
with the canon. The Intermezzo, although in a major key, has a feeling of melancholy and resignation, caused by its strong subdominant emphasis, the weak cadences, delayed harmonic resolutions on the second beat, and the series of descending thirds in the bass (motive x2 in Fig. 6) from F-sharp minor, through D major (both prominent keys in the piece) to B minor before the arrival of the dominant and the conclusion of the A sections.

The Ballade has the most power and energy in the set, recalling in temperament the Op. 79 No. 2 Rhapsodie and the Op. 116 No. 3 Capriccio with the same key (G minor); and its central section is reminiscent of the same section of the Op. 79 No. 1 Rhapsodie, both being in B major. In fact, the piece seems closer to the character of a Rhapsody, and this is exactly what Brahms had named it, before he decided on the title ‘Ballade’ (Parakilas, 1992:183). Although it has the typical ternary form of the lyrical Ballade (shown in Fig. 7), it does not carry the same characteristics of the much earlier Op. 10 Ballades (1854) with their hint of antiquity caused by the open fifths and octaves, modal ambiguity, the narrative style and reflective characters (No. 3 is actually an Intermezzo). The Edward Ballade, the first of Op. 10, is different from the other three, with its highly dramatic course and fiery middle section, and maybe it was this, along with the chordal thematic material, which prompted Brahms to call the later one a Ballade as well. The only part of Op. 118/3 which can be considered song-like is the middle section, but the appearance of the main themes in two different characters (one forte and staccato, the other piano and legato with pedal) carries the implications of a narrative dialogue, like the Op. 10/1, but this time concerning one person, rather than two.

As a ballad tells the story of someone who provokes and receives justice in the end (Parakilas: 35), the piece seems to be a continuous battle between the rebellious character of a person and the distant voice of his conscience, which finally asserts itself. If we take imagination
further, the piece may even reflect the two personalities of the composer: the passionate Kreisler, and the melancholic Brahms. These two opposing characters come together in the Ballade at two points: once in the B section (the first theme appearing in D-sharp minor with the character of the second) and once at the end, where the song-like central theme comes back in the original key of G minor after one last dialogue between the two characters (G minor and E-flat major), and “just enough is heard to leave an emptiness” (Parakilas: 184). The overall key scheme is again 3rd-related, moving from G minor/major to B major and D-sharp minor in the middle section, the latter being enharmonically the minor-mode version of E-flat major which marks the second character of Theme A. Although transitions between the sections are gradual in terms of volume and character, the key changes are sudden. This contradiction draws attention to the abruptness of the changes in tonality and makes them all the more dramatic, adding to the narrative effect. The more stable and consistent character of the middle section is reflected in its regular phrase structure, whereas the temperamental outer sections have 5 and 6-bar phrases, in opposition with the 4 and 8-bar transitions.

The following two pieces were grouped together in Brahms’s manuscripts (Cai, 1986: 9), explaining the paired keys: the Intermezzo in F minor ends in F major, the key of the succeeding Romanze. They are different in character, with the repeated triplet figure in No. 4 giving it a capricious and Schumannesque feeling, consistent with its tempo marking Allegretto un poco agitato, whereas No. 5 has the song-like naivety and lullaby-like quality of the Op. 117 Intermezzni, especially No. 1. What the two have in common is the use of Baroque techniques: canon in the former, chaconne in the latter, counterpoint in both. Op. 118 No.4 is in fact a strict canon at the interval of a crotchet, which is only temporarily arrested at transitions and free passages, which are nonetheless imitative. The coda alternates between strict canon and ‘free’ 4-
The presence of Baroque features does not exclude the presence of Brahms’s technique of developing variation and harmonic ambiguity, especially in the central section of the initial ‘A’ (Fig. 8). Keys are again 3rd-related, with disguised returns and unconventional modulations, moving from F minor to C major to A-flat major in the middle section, the three pitches outlining an F minor triad, and the same ones found in the opening upbeat. This is the leading voice, the dux of the canon, but the fact that it is placed on the second beat while the comes or second voice appears on the first beat of the bar is another instance of Brahms creating ambiguity as to the position of the downbeat. Rhythmic devices are used to mark new beginnings and to smooth transitions between sections, as Brahms stops triplet motion at the end of Section A by resting on a solitary C of 3½ beats (in canon), preparing for the crotchet rhythms of the B section (causing tonal ambiguity in the meantime), and reintroduces it at the transition back to A, where even faster rhythms of semiquavers lead to the return. This time, the initial canonic theme is stated in descending octave-displaced registers, similar to the canon of the B section, bringing together the two sections and unifying the piece. The coda, as stated above, has an overall resolving function,
bringing together all preceding rhythmic motives, concluding with a plagal cadence, looking back to No. 1 and forward to No. 5.

The *Romanze* is unique in that there is no other short piece of Brahms bearing this title. The term is used in his vocal works (*Lieder und Romanzen* Op. 33, 44, 75, 84, 93a) and the 2nd movement of the Op. 51/1 C minor string quartet, implying a song-like piece, a quality which can be associated only with the A section of 118/5. Of Schumann’s *Three Romances* Op. 28, only the second one may have an affinity with Brahms’s work, which is not as passionate and fast paced as the other two. It is noteworthy that this piece was titled *Intermezzo* before Brahms decided to change to *Romanze*, maybe to draw attention to its Romantic character which might be overshadowed by its Baroque form and techniques. If the holographs represent compositional order, this was actually the last piano piece Brahms wrote (Cai, 1986: 357). This would not be surprising, as his ultimate large-scale work for piano, the *Handel Variations* of 1861, had Baroque affinities as well and represented Brahms’s appreciation of former masters, along with his transformation of old forms into new. Similarly, the final works to be completed were the *Eleven Chorale Preludes* for organ, his last homage to the past.

The ‘A’ section of the piece has a ground bass with a 4-bar chorale-like melody on top, which is varied each time and enriched with passing notes, arpeggiation and different cadential progressions, resembling a stately French variation-chaconne (Fig. 9). In spite of its seemingly conventional phrase structure, the accent is placed on a different beat in each bar, either rhythmically or harmonically, resulting in metric ambiguity and sometimes bearing a Sarabande-like quality with a heavy second beat. The alternation of short-long rhythms becomes 3 long notes with the hemiola in the 4th bar. The ‘B’ section is another set of variations over a constant bass, this time in a 3rd-related key, D major, reached through the dominant of D minor from the
previous section. The variations are actually diminutions, increasing in melodic elaboration, reminding one of Chopin’s Berceuse in D-flat major, also with a basso ostinato (constant bass). This is the only other piece in all of Op. 117-119 (the other is 117/1) which has a change of time signature and tempo from section A to B, but Brahms makes it clear that there is a common pulse, with his indication along with the metre change at the transition back to the A section (bar 45). D major is gradually transformed back into D minor and finally F major in this 3-bar transitory passage, which prepares the return, with the help of trills (introduced in the B section). The trills dissolve the preceding metre and reintroduce the short-long pattern along with the original metre. The number of voices reach 6 in the last phrase, reminiscent of the vocal motets Brahms was so fond of writing. Cai (1986) suggests that the piece could also be his idea of a mini-Baroque suite (including a Sarabande and a Musette), where the dance movements are merged rather than separate.

Brahms’s interest in early music manifested itself in many ways in these miniatures, and the last piece of Op. 118 is no exception. Here we find a 4-bar fixed melody, a cantus firmus (Ex. 4), which begins as a solo line at the opening, and is stated another 17 times, in original form, in the dominant minor, and varied in 3rds, 6ths, octaves, and with different accompanying harmonies.

Ex. 4 Op. 118 No. 6 The ‘cantus firmus’.

The dark key of E-flat minor gives the piece a serious, pensive and pathetic quality and even the
middle section, which starts in the relative major of G-flat and has the heroic attitude of the *Ballade*, is clouded with the presence of B-flat minor and the return of the initial key when the cantus firmus is stated in forte octaves, accompanied by F-9th chords, the same harmony as the arpeggios at the opening (Fig.10, bars 53-4). This climactic statement of the theme in the original key is placed exactly 2/3rds of the way through the piece, giving it further significance. Like the *Ballade*, there seem to be two different characters: the pessimistic and the triumphant, and they come together in the middle section once more, this time with a brighter harmony (A-flat major), only to sink back into the gloomy theme. Another prominent feature is the series of descending 3rds, as harmonies (bars 12-15 and repeated 32-35) and as arpeggio passages in section A, and in octaves in the B section to mark the arrival of the theme. In fact, the cantus firmus itself outlines a falling minor third (Ex. 4).

Musgrave (2000: 94) seems sufficiently justified in regarding this particular miniature ‘the most poetic of the late works.’ In fact, it had inspired Brahms’s close friend, the Swiss writer Josef Viktor Widmann to write a poem entitled ‘Op. 118 Intermezzo in E flat minor’ (Avins, 1997: 733), dealing with life’s strivings and death. The main theme has been referred to as ‘a motive in search of an identity’ (Musgrave, 2000: 97), as it is continuously reharmonized until it finally reaches a firm cadence in the tonic key at the end. It is this incessant reharmonization which gives the Intermezzo its dramatic impulse and momentum. It is yet another significant example of Brahms uniting past and future, having symphonic implications like the *Handel Variations*, extreme expressive contrasts, a control of counterpoint, developing variation, and an original tonal plan, moving through the minor dominant, a series of mediant-related keys, and two successive Neapolitans before it comes to rest in the tonic in the last two bars. The final cadential progression, the texture including bare octaves, and the prominent presence of the minor dominant are all features which link this to the C-sharp minor Intermezzo.
of Op. 117. Both provide sorrowful and resigned conclusions to their opuses, reflecting Brahms’s contemporaneous preoccupation with the meaning of life and death.
Op. 119 Four Piano Pieces were the last ones from the Bad Ischl summer of 1893, and as usual, Brahms sent them to Clara as they were completed. The first one to reach her in May was No. 1, which delighted Clara with its dreamlike atmosphere and mysterious opening harmonies. Brahms included a letter, writing: ‘. . . it is crawling with dissonances! These are deemed appropriate and can be explained. . . . “to be played very slowly” isn’t saying enough. Every measure and every note must sound ritard. . . .’ (Avins, 1997:706). Clara responded by calling it a ‘grey pearl’ (Swafford, 1999:586) and commenting that it was ‘. . . so sadly sweet in spite of all its dissonances’ (Niemann, 1946:243). In June, Brahms sent her No. 2 and 3, writing that he had started out to compose one piece but the space at the end had made him write another (Cai, 1986:51). This comment is consistent with the fact that in Brahms’s manuscript, the two pieces are grouped together. His letter includes the words ‘. . . a good fit for your fingers. However, I hardly need say that this kind of thing comes absolutely for your fingers alone, and certainly mustn’t get into anyone else’s’ (Avins: 707). This supports the idea that the pieces were written for her especially, providing new repertoire suitable for her ailing arms and hands. The Rhapsodie, the most technically demanding of the four, was sent to her in July, with the remarks ‘. . . it may not be suitable for your fingers’ (Cai: 55).

This last collection of pieces written for Brahms’s favourite instrument is another heterogeneous group in terms of character, containing the subdued and tonally progressive first Intermezzo, the second and third Intermezzos dealing with variation form in dance-like music, and the final heroic Rhapsodie, the most ambitious of all with its broad structure, which provides
a contrast and counterbalance to the three Intermezzi. As Musgrave has pointed out (1985: 263), there is an intensified use of variation with a greater concentration in the Op. 119 Intermezzi. Pitches and pitch groups seem to provide the motivic material, taking Brahms’s compositional style one step further and closer to the early miniatures of the 20th century. The themes, which again consist of short motives, contain large-scale harmonic implications in all of the pieces, pointing to both overall tonality and subsequent tonal processes. This was probably what Brahms meant when he advised his composition student Jenner in the early 1890s to ‘make a diligent study of Beethoven’s sonata themes and observe their influence on the structure of the movement.’

Although he had used similar techniques in the previous opuses of piano pieces, there is a more refined style in Op. 119, where Brahms experiments with ternary form in yet newer ways, focusing on expansion and symmetry. Thirds play an important role once again, in thematic material and local as well as large-scale harmonic structure.

A lot has been written about the first Intermezzo, and rightly so, as it is fascinating with the ambiguous opening tonality, the theme consisting of falling major and minor thirds, and the continuous opposition between diatonicism and chromaticism, along with the tension between B minor and D major. Although some or all of these elements are found in previous works (Op. 116/1 and 4 contain the chromatic progression found at the beginning of the B section, shown in Fig. 12), this particular example seems in some ways to be the most experimental and forward-looking. Dunsby (1981) has pointed out that the kind of progressive features of Brahms’s music which Schoenberg wrote about are to be found to a greater degree in this particular piece. Newbould (1977) has even suggested that the piece is actually a chaconne, with a repeating ground (first a seven-note bass progression), and carries the same rhythmic pattern as a Baroque Sarabande and Bach’s D minor Chaconne for solo violin (Newbould: 43). It is interesting that
within all its progressive atmosphere, the piece still contains Baroque canonic techniques (Fig. 11). Again we are reminded of Brahms’s Janus-like character, looking back to early techniques, and using them in the context of a motivically and harmonically forward-looking piece. Brahms avoids establishing a tonality at the opening, until the A-sharp in the fourth bar implies dominant harmony and hence B minor. This dichotomy between A-sharp and A-natural persists throughout the piece, being resolved in favour of the former in the penultimate bar before the falling 3rds come to rest as a B minor triad. Another long-term resolution is that of the F-sharp which begins each phrase; this occurs at the end of the piece, when the bass motive of the A section appears as a melodic motive in the right hand (bars 57-8, Fig. 12) and begins a descent (marked with a *rit.* by Brahms) from F-sharp to C-sharp, reaching a B with the last appearance of the falling 3rd motive (bars 62-6).

The return to the opening material is handled quite differently (bars 43-6, Fig. 12), where two bars of overlapping metre (3/8 and 6/16), using the falling 3rds but outlining rising 4ths, appear unexpectedly, followed by a false return of two bars. The return is varied, with triplet rhythms and new chromatic passing notes, forming diminished 4ths, actually falling enharmonic major 3rds. They become perfect 4ths the second time (bar 55-56) and it is notable that the A-sharp appears from the first bar, tipping the balance towards B minor. Musgrave (1985: 263) compares the handling of the falling third pattern here to that in the *Serious Song* No.3, commenting that both create harmonic astringency. He also draws a parallel with the second Intermezzo of Op. 117, as both contain descending quaver figuration and a contrasting second theme in the relative major, with a more direct rhythmic character. Op. 119/1 however, undergoes further distillation of material, giving it a clearer outer plan and formal restraint.

The second Intermezzo is an experiment in combining ternary form with successive...
variation, and the middle section is actually another variation of the theme on a larger scale and in the parallel major, with a change in character from the agitato opening to a graceful waltz, made clear by Brahms through his inclusion of the word grazioso. The poco agitato A section is reminiscent of Op. 118 No. 4 with its repeated rhythmic figures. Six pitches are introduced in the opening, and these generate the motivic and thematic material for both sections (shown in Fig. 13). The theme itself consists of a 5-bar phrase, which is extended through inclusion of an alternating V-I figure of 3 bars (which later becomes a transition of 6 bars between variation 2 and 3) and a final shortened statement of 4 bars. The variations have the same phrase structure as the theme (consistent with Brahms’s principle of variation, as displayed most extensively in the Handel Variations), except for the third one in the tonic key, which mirrors the 4-bar shortened statement.

The piece is another example of the way Brahms uses harmonic and rhythmic procedures to smooth the transition between sections. In this case, the new section is entered through the appearance of its key and its new accompaniment figures by augmentation of a resolving appoggiatura figure, creating a built-in ritardando at the same time (bars 33-35). This particular piece seems to have given Brahms some trouble as to tempo indication, as in the autograph, he included a marking ‘\( \Rightarrow \text{Doppio movimento} \)’ at the beginning of the middle section, which did not make sense in terms of actual increase in tempo by a factor of two. What Brahms really meant was that the B section doubled the note values of the theme and he proceeded to omit this marking when he realized that it was unnecessary, as the music would speak for itself (Epstein, 1995). The two sections have a common pulse; the only difference is that the second covers the same section of the theme in six beats instead of three. The waltz moves in 4-bar phrases and the section has a rounded binary form, a particular favourite of Brahms as he used it previously in Op. 117 and 118. The return to the theme is achieved in augmentation, another
instance of creating agogic accent through rhythmic variation. The second A section is an almost exact repetition of the first, except for the replacement of the original A minor variation with yet another one, reminiscent of Brahms’s enthusiasm for double variation. The piece ends with a reflective coda, which is a seemingly decelerated version of the B theme (similar to the codas of the Ballade Op. 118/3 and the Rhapsodie Op. 79/1), achieved again through augmentation and ritardando.

The third Intermezzo starts out as a simple 4-note figure, accompanied by a C major arpeggio, the three pitches E, G and neighbouring A carrying sufficient meaning to provide melodic and harmonic material for the whole piece (Fig. 14). Taking one more step forward in his variation technique, Brahms works with both successive and motivic variation, displacing the rhythmic figure in repetition, by syncopation, augmentation, extension, cross-rhythms, and developing various parts of it through a variety of keys. The piece, similar to No.1, has an ongoing battle between C major and its relative minor A, which itself competes with A major, third-related to C. This tension is foreshadowed from the first bar and the pitch A plays an important role until the end. Again, the initial motive foreshadows large-scale tonal conflicts.

The various sections are marked by tonal centres, rather than changes in thematic content or character, as the central section is a developing variation of the initial 4-note motive, starting in A major. A series of falling thirds in octaves play a similar role to the ones in Op. 118/6, leading to the return of the theme in the initial key, but in augmentation, being cut off prematurely to be replaced by a dominant-seventh falling arpeggio. This is especially interesting, as the dominant preparation to the tonic appears after the tonic key has already arrived, almost unnoticed due to the plagal cadence through F minor! This late dominant still plays a significant role as it leads to the statement of the theme in its original rhythm, which is once
again interrupted by A major, followed by two 7-bar phrases, the first having a chromatically ascending bass, and the second over a dominant-pedal. The theme rises to the top voice in the former and falls to the alto voice in a descending sequence in the latter passage, both being the only irregular phrases in the piece. As mentioned earlier, the pitch A continues to appear in the coda, interfering with an otherwise conventional V-I cadence and three bars of C major harmony. Although the tension between A minor and A major exists, A minor is never actually confirmed, because it does not appear in root position or with a clear V-I cadence, not to mention being placed on the last quaver of the bar (bar 9). Brahms marks the arrival and the departure of this key with the term *sost.* (bars 10-14), attempting to establish it through a local alteration of tempo, rather than a conventional tonal process. The phrase is repeated twice, to reinforce this weak cadence. Repetition emphasizes other crucial points in the piece, such as bars 21-24, which stress the opposition between A major and A minor. Likewise, bars 56-57 are exact repetitions which stress dominant harmony, and the last five bars are repetitions in three different registers to stress the tonic, in spite of the intervening pitch A.

Another unconventional technique which Brahms employs is the continuous displacement of the two rhythmic motives of the initial bar, alternating between the first and second beats of successive bars, which, along with the accents placed on the last quavers, creates metric ambiguity. Dissonances are also placed on these weakest parts of the bar (bars 11-12), as well as at points of expected resolution (ex. bar 6). Rosen (1990: 114) suggests that Brahms follows Schumann in this respect, but whereas Schumann leaves dissonances unresolved into subsequent beats, Brahms does not deny a resolution, although it comes at an unexpected moment. Another type of tension found in the piece is that between 6/8 and 3/4 metre. This starts to manifest itself in the second bar, where the series of 6 quavers can be interpreted either way if not for the surrounding clear 6/8 articulation. The return of the theme in the original key at bar 41 is in 3/4
with the same 6/8 accompaniment, followed by hemiola passages at bars 43-4, 47-8, 55, and 63-4. The two metres are brought together in the coda at 66-68, the exact place where the C-A conflict is also resolved.

The Rhapsody, for Brahms, implied an expansive piece with a variety of moods, but not having a free form like those of Liszt. He applied his ideal of strict formal design to this genre as well, as his earlier Op. 79 Rhapsodies have sonata-form built into their structures. The Rhapsodie in Op. 119 is an example of ‘a dramatic figure of the sonata tradition brought into the context of the piano miniature’ (Musgrave, 1985: 263), and contains variation in a broader structure, with a symmetrical scheme ABCBA-coda, where the A sections themselves have ABA form (shown in Fig. 15). The proportions of the sections exhibit an interesting pattern, the return of the A section having the most ‘weight,’ being counter-balanced by the coda, which in fact carries motifs from all three sections. The return of the A section is varied, both in key and in rhythmic structure (shown in Fig. 16/4), being extended to almost twice its original length. The inner B section also undergoes variation, developing through numerous flat-keys and suggesting E-flat minor, thus foreshadowing the final key of the piece. The two central sections, B and C, have regular phrase lengths, whereas the outer sections are more adventurous, the main theme having 5-bar units, sometimes being cut off to form shorter phrases. There are motivic relations among the sections, and the coda, which can be considered another developing variation of the initial theme, combines aspects from all sections, acting as an all-unifying and resolving conclusion (Fig. 16/5).

The theme has large-scale harmonic implications, moving through the keys A-flat and C minor (bar 7), with a bar of G-7th, as if cadencing into C. In fact, the two contrasting sections B and C are in the keys of C major and A-flat major respectively; the overall key scheme hence moves first down, then up two successive thirds. A-flat major also plays a transitional role,
providing links between sections. The return to the main theme in the A sections is achieved un
conventionally through C-flat major, which can be interpreted as 3rd-related, VI of E-flat minor, or the Neapolitan of the dominant. This key plays a significant role in the coda and the final cadence, this time definitely assuming the role of the sixth degree. All of these tonal relationships are reflections of Brahms’s long-term logical thinking.

It is probably not a coincidence that Brahms chose the key of E-flat to make his final statement in pianistic writing. Throughout his life, he strove to carry on and revitalize the tradition of classical German music, handed over by the first great Romantic composer, a man, who like Brahms himself, had left his homeland to lead a solitary life in Vienna. This man was Ludwig van Beethoven, to whom Brahms had paid homage in his first published work, the Op. 1 Piano Sonata in C. Charles Rosen put forth the idea that the similarity of the sonata’s opening rhythmic motive to Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* signified ‘an aspiration to the sublime in the academic sense’ (Notley, 2000: 253), and this is exactly what Brahms had from the beginning of his musical life. He had quoted Beethoven again in the last movement of his first symphony, which had taken him fourteen years to perfect, due to the great responsibility of following such a master. In his compositions, Brahms had further distilled the Beethovenian techniques of motivic unfolding of a theme’s potential and the creation of logical formal connections. Using the key of the *Eroica Symphony* (and the *Emperor* Piano Concerto No. 5), which was a symbol of triumph and a turning point in Beethoven’s artistic life, could have implied a triumphant ending for Brahms. But why end the heroic *Rhapsodie* in the tonic minor? Maybe at the same time, it was meant to make a reference to his first romantic piano piece, the E-flat minor Scherzo of 1854 or to bring together the last three opuses through use of a common key, which had began Op. 117 as major, concluded 118 as minor, and in 119, would find its final identity. Or maybe, Brahms still felt that he did not measure up to Beethoven and expressed a lesser, more sorrowful triumph.
Whatever the case may be, the piece provides a fitting climax and farewell to Brahms’s piano compositions, and thus ends a journey which carried him ‘from the broad sweep of a fresco to the delicacy of a miniature painting’ (Geiringer, 1983: 221).
Chapter 5
Playing Brahms His Way

‘Do it how you like, but make it beautiful.’

One consequence of research and analysis is the better understanding of a composition, in relation to its historical context, its significance for the composer, its inner logic and the way it holds together as a coherent whole. Another consequence, which follows from the first, is finding out what the composer wanted to communicate and formulating ideas about reconstructing this in the best possible way during performance. The more clues we find, the better is the reconstruction and the closer is the performance to one which, we hope, would have been approved by the composer. Although research has revealed much about Brahms, as to his character, intellectual activities, compositional techniques, and his ideas about various questions pertaining to performance issues, the more intimate workings of his musical mind have been difficult to trace, due to his caution in destroying any documents which would enable historians to study his own speculations. Although he did not include an abundance of markings on tempo or expression in his works, he believed the score contained sufficient information to produce an authentic and logical performance. He had brushed away questions relating to performance issues by pointing to the music and replying: ‘It is all there.’

He had similar views on tempo, staying away from metronome markings with the comment ‘...the metronome is of no value. For I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together.’ Instead, the tempo could be determined through a sensible interpretation of a combination of the general marking, and the character of the themes. In fact, if the rhythms are played exactly as Brahms wrote them, the tempi reveal themselves,
especially when passing from one section to the other, and all seem proportional, sometimes indicated in the music, as in Op. 118/5. Epstein (1990: 204-5) concludes from analysis that ‘a steady basic pulse runs continuously throughout a work of Brahms, . . . serving as the referential basis for explicit changes of tempo. According to him, new tempos relate to this basic pulse in simple ratios. Rink (1995:270) provides a logical solution to calculating such proportional tempos by ‘letting the durationally equal motivic correspondences “speak for themselves”.’ The best example is perhaps Op. 117, where there is a common underlying pulse which runs through the three Intermezzi; each is an _Andante_, yet each contains a slightly different marking, together with other tempo-related indications throughout the music. The best way to determine a common tempo is to consider the motivic unity and related thematic ideas (Fig.1), arriving at a solution which could best communicate the details as well as the outlines of the music. A similar example of proportionate tempo can be found on a local scale in Op. 119/2.

Davies (1929: 182) writes that Brahms, like Beethoven, used few but particular expression marks only to convey the inner musical meaning, and that in his playing, ‘. . . one felt the fundamental rhythms underlying the surface rhythms.’ This suggests that there was an underlying pulse, but Brahms would also use _rubato_ locally, preferring to ‘lengthen a bar or phrase rather than spoil it by making up the time into a metronomic bar’ (Davies:182). This gave his music its shrinking and swelling effect, aided by ‘hairpins’ (short crescendos and decrescendos), adding sincerity and warmth to the phrases. It is interesting that many of his tempo markings actually relate more to the character of the music rather than to actual speed. Op. 119 No. 3 actually lacks tempo markings, as the terms _Grazioso e giocoso_ and _leggiero_ carry implications only about the general effects that the piece should have. The correct speed would naturally be one which could bring across the light and graceful character, another flowing _Andante_!
Gradual changes in tempo are brought about by changes in the value of the notes or through the use of hemiolas, between sections or in the codas. This is clearly the case in many of the miniatures, such as Op. 117/1 and 3, 118/6 and 119/2 (marked in the Figures). Sometimes, \textit{ritardando} is used together with such processes, as at the end of Op. 117/3, where Brahms writes \textit{rit., poco a poco e egualmente}, suggesting a proportionate change, which can be achieved only through a carefully thought out slowing down of each beat. In the same piece, \textit{Più lento} follows the \textit{ritardandi} as a refrain at the end of the A sections, which seem slower due to augmentation and the decrease in inner movement of the beats. Brahms also uses fermatas before new sections to prolong the final beats, implying the arrival of a slightly different tempo, as in Op. 117/1 and 3, and also in Op. 118/5. Another tempo-related term is \textit{sostenuto}, suggesting a slower tempo throughout its duration as in Op. 118/3, bars 71-78, followed by \textit{poco a poco in tempo}. This must be different from \textit{ritardando}, as the term \textit{sost} is followed by a \textit{rit.} in 117/2, bars 26-30.

In the miniatures, Brahms creates a continuous forward motion through various metrical and rhythmic ambiguities, such as offsetting cadential accents by metrical displacements (as in Op. 118/2), diluting harmonic resolutions with false or partial cadences, and eliding full cadences with the succeeding phrase to lessen its force (Op. 118/6, bar 55). Phrase elisions, augmentations, with motives and phrases out of phase with the measure or the expected sequence, add to the tension, creating potential energy and an unavoidable pace, which as Brahms argued, is inherent in the music. Changes in the texture, articulation and general character of the music marks the arrival of new sections (best seen in Op. 118/3 and 6; Op. 119/2 and 4), and gives the feeling of a new tempo, although it is not necessarily so. Brahms does not resolve various tensions at the same time, and although many events, whether melodic, harmonic, rhythmic or metrical, take place simultaneously, they are out of phase with each other, making the final resolution all the more effective. All these techniques enabled him to build up intense constructs.
of tension and release in relatively short temporal space.

It is important at this point to consider the characteristics of the pianos on which Brahms composed the late miniatures and his general views on piano playing. He had been given a Streicher grand in 1873, which he seems to have preferred up to 1880, after which he had also used Bösendorfers (Cai, 1986: 407). The Streicher had a light action, short key stroke, leather-covered hammers, and lower tension resulting from being straight-strung. It had a purer sound, less overtones and a much lighter bass than modern grand pianos, with the middle register having the fullest sound, dominating the bass and treble (Cai, 1989:60-1). This partly accounts for his preference to place melodies in the ‘tenor voice,’ as these could be brought out comfortably due to the inherently different tone of the middle register on his piano. The thicker texture of the bass in his music (thirds places especially low) would not have sounded as heavy as on a modern grand, because his bass would have a faster decay, possibly requiring more pedal. On the contrary, too much pedal on a modern piano would produce a muddy sound and unclear articulation of the melodies. According to pianist Eugen d’Albert, Brahms left the use of the pedal to the player’s taste (Pascall, 1991:10), but he did indicate when he wanted a specific type of pedalling. He used *col ped* for large sections, as in 117/1 (bar 38) and 117/2 (beginning), *una corda* for atmospheric effect, as in 118/2 (bar 57), 118/6 (bar 5) and 118/3 (bar 41), and also *senza pedal* in the last piece (bar 116) to enhance the solitude of the final triad. In 118/4, the pedal supports the downbeat of the canon, while in 118/1, it is used to create harmonies from the arpeggios. In 117/3 (bars 41-45), Brahms asks for a blurred effect through a 5-bar pedal, but in 119/4 (bars 39-40), a different pedal is required for each arpeggio to bring out the descending inner voice in the right hand.

Florence May, Brahms’s student for some time, writes that ‘he made very much of the
well-known effect of two notes slurred together. . . the mark had special significance in his music’ (Musgrave, 2000, 130). This kind of slurring is a prominent characteristic of the C-sharp minor Intermezzo Op. 117/3, the second theme of 117/2, and also of Op. 118/2. Hutcheson (1974: 254) believes Brahms was the first composer to use double slurs systematically for the indication of sub-phrasing. May also writes that he ‘particularly disliked chords to be spread unless marked so by the composer for the sake of special effect’ (Musgrave:130). Brahms indicates this in 117/1, creating a strumming effect for the tonic chord, and also to separate the canonic voices (bar 51); spread chords are used similarly in the B section of 117/2 (bars 24-5), the cadences in 118/2 (bar 48 and 116), and in the C section of 119/4 (bars 93-5, etc.) to separate the melodic note from the accompanying ones.

Judging from the type of piano Brahms preferred and the relatively narrow dynamic range of the late miniatures (pp to ff, except for 118/6 where there is also ppp at bar 5), he probably favoured a smaller sound, consistent with the intimate character of the pieces. More important for him was to express the intellectual and musical meaning of a work and produce as authentic a performance as possible through being faithful to the score. The significance of rhythm showed itself from his first compositions, like the E-flat minor Scherzo, and all his works strive for rhythmic precision and intensity. The following quotation from May’s biography illustrates Brahms’s views on pianistic interpretation:

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 the composer may have lived, or what may have been the peculiarities or excellencies and limitations of the instruments of his day.

(Musgrave, 2000: 130)
Last Words

Just as Brahms’s codas had a summarizing function and acted as sites for the resolution of accumulated tension in a piece, the late miniatures played the same roles, but on a much larger scale. They were in fact ‘codas’ to his pianistic output, bringing together all aspects of his compositional style, containing a wealth of techniques in very little space. This makes their performance all the more challenging, as just like a masterful painting, a successful interpretation should contain abundant detail, but never obscure the meaning of the whole. Each detail should be articulated in such a way as to enhance the organicism and the overall beauty of the masterpiece. This may all sound very elusive, but if Brahms’s pieces are played exactly as written, this will undoubtedly lead to an interpretation which is most faithful to the intentions of the composer.

As concluded from the previous chapters, out of the three opuses examined, only Op. 117 stands out as being a multi-piece, whereas Op. 118 and 119 seem to be collections of miniatures, having common traits which bring them together, but not necessarily asserting that they should be performed as complete sets. Brahms himself seems to have picked out favourites when performing, and there is no direct evidence that he wanted even Op. 117 to be performed as a complete work. More important for him, was being faithful to the score and producing a performance with varying and sensitive expression, because this is precisely what his music contains. As Brahms once said, ‘It’s all in the music.’

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Notes


2. This is how Brahms had described the three Intermezzi to Rudolph van der Legen. (Keys, 1989: 242).

3. Around the time of composition of the Op. 117 Intermezzi, Brahms was in the middle of an ongoing quarrel with Clara Schumann over the publication of Schumann’s D Minor Symphony, in its original and revised version. This led to an exchange of very bitter letters. It seems that after Clara received the pieces, all was forgotten, as she wrote in her journal: ‘In these pieces I at last feel musical life stir again in my soul....How they make one forget much of the suffering he has caused one.’ From Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist’s Life Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters*. Vol II. Trans from the 5th ed by Grace E. Hadow. New York: Vienna House, 1972, 420, cited in Jan Swafford (1999): *Johannes Brahms, A Biography*. London: Papermac, Macmillan Publisher’s Ltd., 583.

4. Brahms associated himself with E. T. A. Hoffmann’s fictional character, the romantic, half-mad Kapellmeister, Johannes Kreisler. In his *Schumann Variations* Op. 9, he had followed Schumann’s Op. 9 *Carnaval* by signing the more vigorous and ardent variations as *Kreisler*, and the more lyrical ones *B for Brahms*. He copied down quotations from books he read into a notebook which he called “The Young Kreisler’s Treasure Chest”, starting in his teenage years and continuing until his death. The Young Kreisler also echoed Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, an iconic book of the era. *Werther* was another romantic character whom Brahms identified with; one who suffered a frustrated passion for the wife of a friend.

5. The term ‘holograph’ is used to describe manuscripts of Brahms which were not signed by him.


7. Cited in Cai: 270. In fact, only two concert programmes between 1893-1900 in the Gesellschaft archive in Vienna included a complete performance of any of the four late opuses. (Cai: 272).


10. It is noteworthy that the last of the *Four Serious Songs*, Op. 121 (1896), expressing the importance of faith, hope, and love, also begins and ends in E-flat major. This was another farewell by Brahms to his other favourite genre, the song.

11. Quoted by Fanny Davies as Brahms’s response to a question about how to play one of his pieces, in her recollections (1929: 184).


**Bibliography**


Discography


Reference Scores


