BRAHMS and the Principle of Developing Variation

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Would you be interested in a talk on Brahms? Here I'd probably have something to say that only I can say. For though my exact contemporaries, and those who are older than I, also lived in Brahms's time, they aren't "modern." But the younger Brahmsians can't know the Brahms tradition from first-hand experience, and anyway they mostly tend to be "reactionary." But: what I have in mind is the theory of composition, not anecdotes!

Letter from Arnold Schoenberg to Hans Rosbaud, 7 January 1933, in response to an invitation to give a radio talk

Preface

> Yes, you have completely conquered me with your music! Not for a long time has any first impression affected me to such a degree. I feel the symphony belongs to those few exalted works that grab hold of a man mercilessly, embrace him with the first note, and refuse to release him with the last—instead pursuing him further and making him feel they have taken possession of him for all time. One even forgets admiration (which is otherwise a nice thing) and is easily carried along on magnificent waves. I need not tell you by what means of enchantment you manage this, from the tenderest and sweetest to the stormiest and most powerful.

Ernst Rudorff, a composer and teacher in Berlin, wrote thus to Brahms on 5 January 1884 after having heard one of the first performances of the Third Symphony. Anyone who has been "possessed" by a Brahms work will probably appreciate the sincere, if high-flown, sentiments. But if at all familiar with the literature on Brahms, he will also be aware how few commentators have succeeded in the difficult task hinted at (but distinctly avoided) by Rudorff, that of articulating how Brahms works his special magic. Musical analysis and criticism too often fall short of communicating the *Bewunderung* or the *Bezauberung* evoked in a listener (to use Rudorff's categories)—either the more conscious, intellectual "admiration" for technical achievement, or the less voluntary "enchantment" at the aesthetic experience.

In discussing Brahms's procedures of thematic continuity and economy—for which he coined the term "developing variation"—Arnold Schoenberg came closer than any other critic to unveiling the most compelling qualities of this music. Schoenberg's analyses, however, are frustratingly brief, normally covering only a few bars of music: they provide flashes of insight rather than sustained

illumination. This book attempts to show that a careful clarification, refinement, and enlargement of Schoenberg's concept of developing variation can yield a valuable tool for examining not just brief themes by Brahms, but larger portions of movements, and even entire works.

I have made no attempt to treat every piece or genre, concentrating instead on about eighteen important works that allow us to trace Brahms's increasingly sophisticated use of the techniques of developing variation during his compositional career. I also assess what these techniques might owe to the music of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Liszt, and how they find their way into Schoenberg's early compositions. By adopting an approach that is both chronological and comparative, I have sought to avoid the common shortcoming of analytical studies—that of viewing works in isolation, ignoring their relationships to other pieces by the same composer and to those by significant predecessors, contemporaries, and followers.

I deal mainly with the larger instrumental works of Brahms—chamber, piano, and symphonic—because it is here that we see the composer at his most ambitious; he attempts to reconcile the procedures of developing variation and of his beloved sonata form, thus applying on an impressively large scale what was defined by Schoenberg as a more local, lower-level principle. But I have also included analyses of several songs that reveal these methods at work in the smaller dimensions of the Lied.

Ideally, the reader of this book should have a basic familiarity with the music discussed, and have as well a score with bars numbered (although the publishers have allowed me to be generous with musical examples and to include substantial portions of pieces). I hope that even without these resources the main points of my arguments and analyses can be followed. Even the densest writing about music should never become opaque; it should not retreat behind needlessly technical jargon or intricate graphic representations.

Although Brahms and Schoenberg provided inspiration and raw material for this study, I am indebted to many others for its realization. I am grateful to the Department of Music at the University of California, Berkeley, for its support and encouragement. My thanks go especially to Professor Joseph Kerman, whose editorial judgment—at once firm, sensitive, and diplomatic—remains the *Bewunderung* of all whose words pass under his pen. Professor Michael Senturia suggested, and then helped me to implement, the methods of rhythmic and metrical analysis used here; his highly original ideas on the structure of the Third Symphony stimulated my own account of that piece. Professor Edward Cone of Princeton made helpful suggestions that induced me to reformulate several of my analyses.

I want also to thank the staffs of the Music Library at Berkeley and the Arnold Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles, especially Jerry McBride. The Schoenberg manuscript reproduced as Figure 1 was brought to my attention by the late Clara Steuermann.

My editors at the University of California Press, Doris Kretschmer, Marilyn Schwartz, Mary Lamprech, and Ann Basart, have all helped make the production of this book very smooth. I am also grateful to Mel Wildberger for preparing the musical examples and to Clovis Lark for the index.

Throughout this project, and the years of graduate school that led up to it, my father, mother, and sister have been both materially and spiritually supportive. My wife Anne has been this and more—more sensible, good-natured, and affectionate than any moody author has a right to expect.

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Prologue: Brahms and the Schoenberg Critical Tradition

I

In 1946 Robert Maynard Hutchins, chancellor of the University of Chicago, sought Arnold Schoenberg's advice on the creation and organization of a music department. Schoenberg recommended, as one of several possibilities, "a clean-cut Musicological Department" whose sole function should be research. He provided Hutchins with "Some Problems for the Department," a list of a few subjects "with which classes could become busy." As might be expected, Schoenberg included mainly compositional and analytical topics, such as "methods of transition" and a "systematic cataloguing of features of rhythm." He also proposed a subject with the suggestive title "developing variation."[1]

Although Schoenberg discussed developing variation in his published writings only sporadically, and often aphoristically, he clearly considered it one of the most important structural principles of Western art music since about 1750. Perhaps the clearest single definition is one of the last he attempted, in a 1950 essay entitled "Bach":

> Music of the homophonic-melodic style of composition, that is, music with a main theme, accompanied by and based on harmony, produces its material by, as I call it, *developing variation*. This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, vari-

[1]Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, pp. 240–42.

> ety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the *idea* of the piece.[2]

Here and elsewhere Schoenberg stresses that this is primarily a thematic or melodic procedure, distinct from the techniques characteristic of contrapuntal, polyphonic music, where "the theme is practically unchangeable and all the necessary contrasts are produced by the addition of one or more voices" (p. 109). In polyphonic music, development, or *Entwicklung*, takes place less by means of variation within a single voice than by alteration of "the mutual relationship of the simultaneous sounds," or parts.

The concept of developing variation appears in a number of different locutions in Schoenberg's writings. As early as the 1923 essay "Twelve-Tone Composition" (pp. 207–8), he discusses development and variation in the sense adumbrated above. In "For a Treatise on Composition" (1931), he states that repetition is the initial stage in music's formal technique, and variation and development its higher developmental stages" (p. 265)—a viewpoint later elaborated in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*. In 1933 he writes similarly of "development through variation."[3]

These terms can be misleading, for they do not refer to specific formal structures—to the "development" section (*Durchführung*) of a sonata form or to a set of discrete "variations" on a theme (although both kinds of structures can make use of the techniques).[4] Rather, developing variation represents a broad principle of thematic composition, one that Schoenberg formulates most polemically (and characteristically) in the 1931 essay "Linear Counterpoint." "Whatever happens in a piece of music is nothing but the endless reshaping of a basic shape," he argues. "Or, in other words, there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself. . . . The various characters and forms [arise] from the fact that variation is carried out in a number of different ways" (p. 290).

[2]Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, p. 397. All further references to *Style and Idea* in this chapter will be to the Stein edition and will be included in the text. For a bibliography of all Schoenberg's published writings, see Walter B. Bailey, "Schoenberg's Published Articles."

[3]Arnold Schoenberg, "Neue und veraltete Musik, oder Stil und Gedanke," in *Stil und Gedanke*, p. 468. This is the original German version of the essay-lecture that Schoenberg revised and translated in 1946 and then included in the original *Style and Idea* (1950). Most of Schoenberg's remarks on developing variation are conveniently assembled as an appendix in Rainer Wilke, *Brahms, Reger, Schönberg Streichquartette*, pp. 193–98.

[4]Schoenberg felt the English term "development" was a misnomer for the central segment of sonata form: "It suggests germination and growth which rarely occur. The thematic elaboration and modulatory 'working out' (*Durchführung*) produce some variation, and place the musical elements in different contexts, but seldom lead to the 'development' of anything new." See Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, p. 200, fn. 1.

Schoenberg's essays do not spell out the ways that the basic shape—what he sometimes called a *Grundgestalt*—can be varied. (I return to that topic below.) But they do suggest how he viewed the historical evolution of the principle. J. S. Bach was at once the greatest master of the contrapuntal art and, in his "fluent and well-balanced melodies," the originator of developing variation; this technique was then taken up and refined by the Viennese classicists (p. 118). Schoenberg gives no specific examples of how Bach employed developing variation, but in one well-known example seeks to demonstrate its use by the pre-eminent Viennese classicist, Beethoven: he describes the second subject in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony as deriving "from a reinterpretation of the two main notes [of the first subject] E♭ and F as tonic and dominant of E♭ major, surrounded by B♭s" (p. 164). This is, unfortunately, not one of Schoenberg's more persuasive analyses.[5] He had greater success (and more interest) in his investigations of Brahms, who he felt brought developing variation to its most advanced state in the nineteenth century.

In "Criteria for the Evaluation of Music" (1946), Schoenberg compares Brahms with Wagner, who, "in order to make his themes suitable for memorability, had to use sequences and semi-sequences, that is, unvaried or only slightly varied repetitions differing in nothing essential from first appearances, except that they are exactly transposed to other degrees" (p. 129). Schoenberg gives two examples from *Tristan*, the first seven bars of the Prelude and the two bars of Isolde's command to Brangäne in Act I, scene 2, "*Befehlen liess dem Eigenholde.*" In each, a brief phrase is repeated sequentially (though *not* exactly). Dismissing this technique as "primitive" and "inferior," Schoenberg points admiringly to Brahms, who avoided exact repetition and "repeated phrases, motives and other structural ingredients of themes only in varied forms, if possible in the form of . . . *developing variation*" (p. 129).

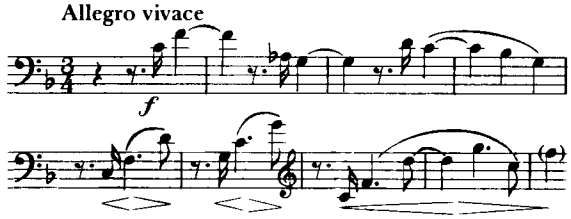
Schoenberg does not analyze Brahms's music from this viewpoint here, but he does so on several other occasions, most notably in two lectures given over Radio Frankfurt in 1931 and 1933. The first accompanied a broadcast performance of his own Orchestral Variations, op. 31. The second was read in honor of the centenary of Brahms's birth; in 1947 Schoenberg expanded and translated it for inclusion in *Style and Idea*, and provided the well-known title "Brahms the Progressive."

In the earlier talk, Schoenberg adduces a late Brahms theme in order to defend the theme of the Orchestral Variations against charges of ugliness and incomprehensibility. "New music is never beautiful on first acquaintance," he

[5]Treating only a few bars of music, the analysis is too brief to demonstrate how developing variation shapes Beethoven's movement as a whole. Furthermore, Schoenberg misconstrues the main theme; as Schenker demonstrated and as basic musical perception tells us, the "two main notes" are not E♭ and F, but the two analogous downbeats, E♭ and D, which Schenker analyzes as the basic "two-note motive" of the movement. See Heinrich Schenker, ["Analysis of the First Movement"].

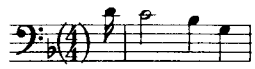
explains. "The reason is simply this: one can only like what one remembers; and with all new music that is very difficult."[6] The greatest popular composers, like Johann Strauss, made their melodies "memorable" by using exact or parallel repetition, Schoenberg observes, citing the first part of the *Blue Danube* and numbering from one to seven the parallel restatements of the simple four-bar phrase. As we have just seen, even Wagner (in Schoenberg's view) relied heavily on sequential repetition. "But a stricter style of composition must do without such convenient resources," Schoenberg claims. "It demands that nothing be repeated without promoting the development of the music, and that can only happen by way of far-reaching variations." He then evokes Brahms:

Here is a theme that develops rapidly:

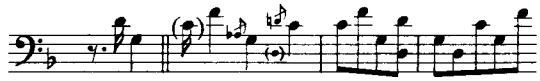


You are certainly expecting me to quote something modern and extreme, but you are wrong: It is the opening of Brahms's F major Cello Sonata [op. 99].

Young listeners will probably be unaware that at the time of Brahms's death this sonata was still very unpopular and was considered indigestible. . . . At that time the unusual rhythm within this $\frac{3}{4}$ time, the syncopations which give the impression that the third phrase is in $\frac{4}{4}$:

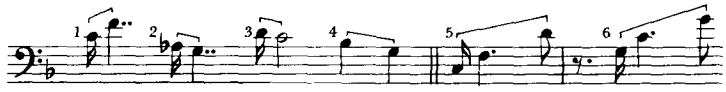


and the unusual intervals, the ninths contained in this phrase [bar 5], made it difficult to grasp. I felt all this myself, so I know how seriously it must be taken! To make matters worse, the theme develops too quickly, and its motivic evolution is very difficult for the ear to trace, without the help of the written page. It is only there that one sees that the opening fourth is inverted into a fifth:



[6]Arnold Schoenberg, "The Orchestral Variations, Op. 31: A Radio Talk," p. 28. The original German version of the talk is included as "Vortrag über Op. 31" in Schoenberg's *Stil und Gedanke*, pp. 255–71. At the archives of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles there is a partial tape recording of the broadcast.

but this is hard for the ear to grasp, if only because the initial phrasing in two-note groups then switches to groups of three:



So those who did not understand at the time, were right.[7]

The developmental features that Schoenberg admires involve the intervals, rhythms, meter, and note groupings of Brahms's theme. Schoenberg's analysis of the first element is, alas, almost as elliptical as the theme itself. We do not learn precisely where or how the opening fourth is inverted to a fifth: the D–G figure never appears on the "written page" in the initial rhythm, as Schoenberg notates it in his third example. Nor is the figure easy to discern among his parentheses and grace notes.

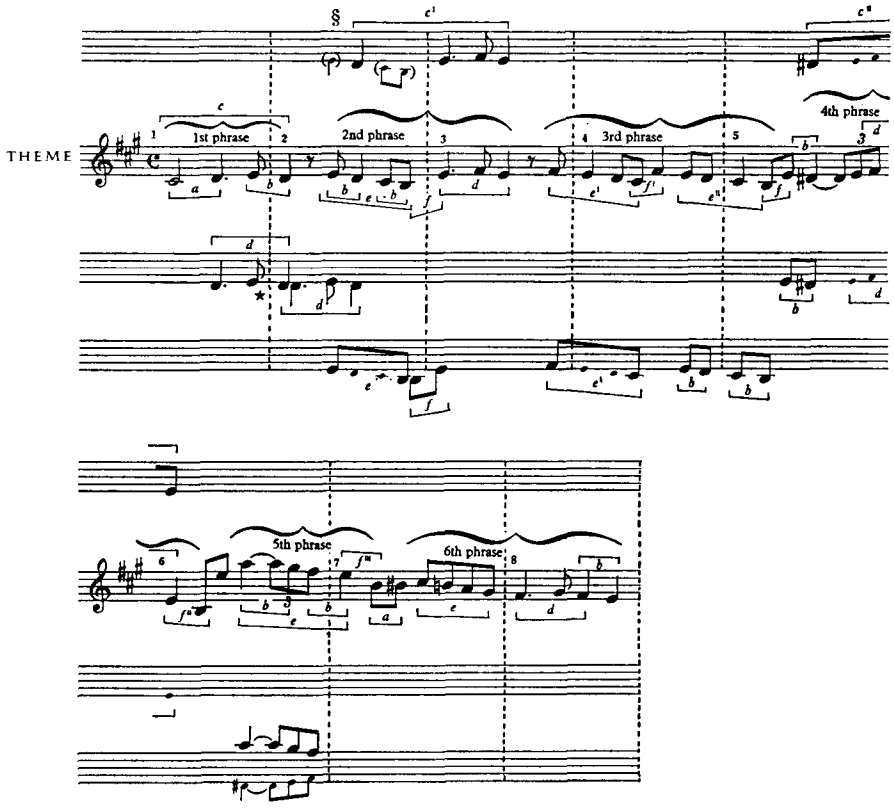
More important and "memorable," I think, is the rhythmic and metrical evolution of the opening two-note motive. In his last example, Schoenberg suggests that the B♭–G figure of bar 4 represents a developmental variation of the head motive, whose unequal rhythmic values are now equalized in two quarter notes. Bars 5–6 constitute a further development, in which the two notes become three. Schoenberg's second example implies that variation of the basic motive also obscures the notated meter, creating the illusion of a $\frac{4}{4}$ measure in bars 3–4. He might have suggested further that in the second half of the theme there is an analogous or corresponding metrical extension, here implying $\frac{5}{4}$ (ex. 1). Despite its rapid and fluid motivic development, Brahms's theme comprises two nearly symmetrical phrases of four and five measures.

EXAMPLE 1: Brahms, Violoncello Sonata, op. 99, I.

By slightly refining Schoenberg's analysis, then, we can begin to understand his view of developing variation in Brahms. Brahms builds a theme by means of a very free, but recognizable, reinterpretation of the intervals and rhythms of a brief motive. Although the process can result in considerable metrical ambiguity, the phrase structure remains essentially conventional and symmetrical on a higher level.

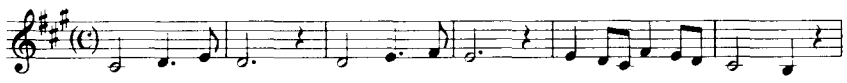
[7]Schoenberg, "Orchestral Variations," pp. 28–30.

EXAMPLE 2: Schoenberg's analysis of Brahms's String Quartet, op. 51, no. 2. Examples 2–4 are reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber, Ltd., from *Style and Idea*, edited by Leonard Stein.



In "Brahms the Progressive," his most celebrated essay, Schoenberg reveals these same procedures at work in other themes of Brahms's. Here he evokes the older composer not simply to justify his own music, but to demonstrate that Brahms, so often branded pejoratively as "the classicist, the academician," was in fact "a great innovator in the realm of musical language" (p. 401). Much of the discussion consists of brief examples of asymmetrical phrase structures in Brahms (and other composers)—combinations of phrases of differing lengths and numbers of measures not divisible by eight, four, or two. But Schoenberg gives a lengthier and more persuasive account of how two themes of Brahms are generated by the process of developing variation: those from the Andante of the A-Minor String Quartet, op. 51, no. 2, and from "O Tod," the third of the *Four Serious Songs*, op. 121.

EXAMPLE 3: Schoenberg's rewriting of the Brahms theme.



The quartet theme, Schoenberg notes, "contains exclusively motive forms which can be explained as derivatives of the interval of a second" (p. 431) (see ex. 2). The multiple staves in Schoenberg's example do not represent any hierarchy of structural levels (as they might in Schenker); they serve only to display clearly the numerous motive forms that Brahms develops from the basic interval, the second, labeled *a*. Schoenberg explains:

> *b* then is the inversion upward [*sic*] of *a*;
> *c* is *a* + *b*;
> *d* is part of *c*;
> *e* is *b* + *b*, descending seconds, comprising a fourth;
> *f* is the interval of a fourth, abstracted from *e*, in inversion.
>
> *(p. 431)*

Schoenberg anticipates criticism of this kind of intervallic analysis: skeptics "might reason that steps of a second or even fractions of a scale are present in every theme without constituting the thematic material" (p. 431). But he defends himself by analyzing "O Tod," which displays a "similar secret" based on another single interval, a third. (This analysis will be discussed in Chapter 6.) Schoenberg then returns to the metrical-rhythmic aspects of the quartet theme, which, as in op. 99, are intimately bound up with the intervallic processes.

The theme has a conventional length of eight bars, which divide into two roughly symmetrical halves, an "antecedent" extending through the half cadence on V on the second beat of bar 5 and a "consequent" beginning on the next beat and continuing to a tonic cadence in bar 8. As Schoenberg demonstrates, however, the six component "phrases"—for convenience I shall retain his term for the groupings—evolve quite freely, often overriding the notated meter. The first three phrases and the last occupy one and one-half bars each, the fourth and fifth a single bar. This design wreaks havoc with the written bar line:

> This first phrase ends practically on the first beat of measure 2. In order to appreciate fully the artistic value of the second phrase's metrical shift, one must realize that even some of the great composers, Brahms' predecessors, might have continued as in [example 3], placing the second phrase in the third measure.
>
> *(p. 435)*

But Brahms eschews any such symmetry, preferring to let his theme evolve more flexibly.