Analysis of Brahms’ Intermezzo in Bb minor
Op. 117 No. 2

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BRAHMS INTERMEZZO / Op. 117 No. 2

STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW

A

A'

(extension)

A''

B

B'

B''

C

(A+B)

A'''

(extension)

CODA
BRAHMS INTERMEZZO Op. 117 No. 2
EXPLANATION OF GRUNDGESTALT

Full grundgestalt
The pickup measure and the first half of measure one form the full grundgestalt, which is constructed of the basic rhythmic shape (shown below) stated, repeated (transposed down a second) and then inverted.

Essential rhythmic motive
An arpeggiated octave is split into a fourth and fifth (both tritones in this example) and approached from above by step.

Essential rhythmic motive (inversion)
The arpeggiated octave is inverted and approached by step from below. Note the movement from E-natural to F (#4 to 5).

Essential melodic motive
(reduction of mm. 0-1)
3-2-2-1 in soprano
4-3 in bass

Essential melodic motive (variation)
(reduction of mm. 2-3)
1-2-2-5 in soprano
4-3 in bass
The opening of Brahms' Intermezzo in Bb minor is astonishing. Rather than establish the tonic in a traditional fashion, Brahms begins with a ii-i progression in first inversion. The piece is off and running from the start, suggesting multiple tonal regions. The Db as the bass note in m. 1 immediately hints of the relative major (major mediant) region. The use of first inversion chords also serves as a way to emphasize mediant relationships in general and bestow an ambiguous dual function to the bass note (which in many parts of the piece feels simultaneously like the root and third of a triad). In this opening, Brahms displays his mastery of ambiguity - not the kind of ambiguity that makes the listener feel lost or confused, but the type that makes us feel as if we are being lead in different directions simultaneously, overlappingly. At every twist and turn, Brahms shows full awareness of the multiple implications of every harmonic movement, and the pace at which he utilizes these implications rarely gives the listener any sense of solid ground.

The Grundgestalt of the piece is outlined in Figures 2-1 to 2-3. The basic rhythmic motive (Fig. 2-2a) consists of an arpeggiated octave (divided into a 4th and a 5th) approached from above by step. In the case of the diminished ii chord presented in the pickup measure, the octave is divided equally into two tritones (dim4, aug5). This immediately draws attention to the importance of symmetry and mirroring in the piece. It is remarkable to note that the grundgestalt already contains within it multiple motivic transformations. Before the first measure even begins, the structure of the piece has begun to unfold. The essential rhythmic motive moves down a step and repeats, then becomes inverted, starting on E natural and moving up. The movement from E-natural up to F in m. 1 becomes an important motive in the closing measures of the piece, forming a repeated pedal figure in the bass over which multiple tonalities can peacefully coexist.

At the end of the first measure, the grundgestalt repeats with the same harmony, but this time the second scale degree (C) is approached from below instead of above, then moves up a fourth to F (see reduction in Fig. 2-3b). The bass movement is repeated verbatim: Eb-Db. The apparent grace notes in the grundgestalt are not just ornaments, but serve as important elements of the "tonal problem."

The perceived melody at the beginning of the opening phrase (Fig. 2-3a: Db-C-C-Bb) simultaneously emphasizes mediant relationships and the interval of a second (dividing the third into two seconds). The first variation of this melody (Fig. 2-3b: Bb-C-C-F) also plays an important motivic role that will reappear in the piece.

The first two measures expose two essential cross-relations: Eb/E (4/#4) and Ab/A (b7/#7). The potential functions of these pitches in relevant tonal regions are shown in Figure 4a. The #4 (E) is revealed in m. 1 by inverting the half-step from Db-C in the opening phrase, exposing the interval of a second to be essential (note: Db-C / C-Bb / Bb-C in the soprano, Eb-Db in the bass).
The first complete statement of the A section is shown above (mm. 0-9). After the Grundgestalt and its first variation are stated in mm. 0-2, the same motivic combination is used to wind through a circle of fifths progression. Throughout this progression, the essential cross-relations (Eb/E, Ab/A) continue to be emphasized, along with a new cross-relation: Gb/G. At this point, the importance of the Gb/G cross-relation does not appear significant, yet we can already note its correlation with the Eb/E (Gb/G = 4/4 in the mediant region, just as Eb/E = 4/4 in the tonic region).

In mm. 5-9, an extended ii-V-i cadence into the tonic Bb minor occurs. However, the frequent presence of the Db throughout this cadence gives it an ambiguous character. The Db does not appear to function as a chord tone, but it provides several other important functions. In addition to keeping the pitch in our ear, smoothing the impending arrival in Db major (the major mediant/relative major region), it also makes the return of the opening Grundgestalt at the end of m. 9 appear completely natural. What is most fascinating about this arrival is that it is not the tonic chord, but the supertonic (C dim) that Brahms lands on, mirroring the opening of the piece. It is as if Brahms has combined the ii-V-i Grundgestalt into one tonic figure, which gives him immediate, functional access to the first six pitches of the Bb minor scale.

Measures 9-22 follow essentially the same form as mm. 2-9 with an important harmonic shift and an extension of the cadence, which will now lead to the major mediant region in m. 23. In the second half of m. 9, the opening phrase repeats, but this time the Bb from m. 2 moves up one scale degree to become a C in m. 11. The effect of this change is hardly perceived by the listener, yet it allows Brahms to smoothly transpose the harmony in the following measures up a second, landing on a C7 chord in the second half of m. 11 instead of the Bb minor seventh of m. 2.

The circle of fifths progression from mm. 3-6 is now transposed up a step, while the previously exposed cross-relations (Eb/E, Ab/A, Gb/G) are utilized to alter the diatonic chords. Were Brahms to follow an identical path to mm. 3-6, the cadence would eventually lead us to Cb instead of Bb. However, at m. 14, the expected move from Db transforms into a brief cadential motion towards the minor dominant region (f), which also functions as the median of the median (Db). In m. 14, a B-natural appears, seeming to function as a Cb in a Db7 chord (the B natural is respelled as Cb just a few measures later in m. 18). However, in the move towards the minor dominant region, the B-negative acts as the #4 of an augmented 6th chord. In addition, the spelling of the chord in m. 14 as an apparent first inversion B minor chord further reinforces the flexible functionality of first inversion chords, an idea that is central to the Grundgestalt.
In m. 17, the descending shape first seen in mm. 8-9 is interrupted before it can ascend. The brief f-minor tonality moves right back to Db in m. 18, which looks suspiciously like m. 14, the B-natural now respelled as C-flat. Measures 18-21 act as a varied repetition of mm. 14-17 (and 5-8), using the sweeping descent and ascent to function as the neapolitan of Db, leading us smoothly into the B section. Rather than lead directly from the neapolitan to the mediant's dominant, Brahms steps first into the mediant's mediant (which appeared just a few measures prior as the minor dominant). There is a sense of déjà vu as the B section begins in Db major, almost as if we've been there from the start.

The entry into the B section (mm. 22-24) contains the same melodic motions outlined in the Grundgestalt (Figs. 2-3a, 2-3b), now in the mediant major region. The melodic motion begins with the first inversion f-minor chord mentioned above. Harmonically, the Ab in the bass seems to possess a stronger function as the root of a dominant chord in Db (the same could be said of m. 17). Brahms is utilizing the ambiguous function of first inversion chords yet again, just as he did in the opening Grundgestalt. The half-step motions in the bass clef of mm. 23-25 (G-Ab, C-Db) recall the essential cross-relations exposed in the opening measures (and function identically in the mediant region as #4, #7).

The rhythmic pace of the B section feels slower due to the use of 16th notes instead of 32nd notes as the predominant metric unit, yet the harmonic motion in the treble clef is moving faster, working like a condensed version of the circle of fifths progression from the opening of the piece (compare mm. 24-25 to mm. 2-5). The figures in the treble clef drift in and out of sync with their harmonic counterparts in the bass, and the resultant texture oscillates gently back and forth somewhere between the tonic and major mediant regions. In m. 27, the D-natural makes a surprising appearance as the harmony clings briefly to the mediant’s supertonic (e). The rhythmic pace intensifies as the inner voices move in parallel octaves, hovering around Bb in m. 27, then around Db in m. 28. At the beginning of m. 30, a very strong motion back to the tonic region (Bb) occurs with a typical Vsus4 chord configuration, but instead of the A-natural moving up to the tonic Bb, it continues its motion downward to Ab, making a strikingly smooth, but unexpected return to the beginning of the B section (in the mediant region). The B’ section begins in a seemingly identical fashion to the first iteration (mm. 22-23), but as the section proceeds, just as in the A’ section, certain pitches are carefully altered, further blurring the boundaries between the tonic and mediant region.
Starting in m. 32, certain notes are methodically varied from the first B section: C-Db of m. 24 becomes Bb-Cb, C becomes Cb, and Ab becomes A-natural. These are the very same cross-relations that were exposed in the A section. By the end of m. 33, the bass notes move up a third, almost as if Brahms is applying the technique of chord inversion to an entire section of music. Measures 37-38 contain the strongest cadence of the piece thus far (into the mediant Db), allowing us for the first time to stop and take a breath. But before we can inhale, the Db steps back down to the Bb using the same 3-2-2-1 motion of the grundgestalt. The arrival at Bb feels nothing like a resting place, however, as Brahms uses this motion as a springboard to elaborate the grundgestalt even further.

In the C section (mm. 39-51) the Grundgestalt and all of its variations from both the A and B sections are magnificently integrated. In m. 39, the entire shape is inverted, the descending ii-i (3-2-2-1) motion now rising from the bass clef as V-VI (#4-5-5-b6). The octaves are now divided into thirds and sixths (as opposed to the fourths and fifths of the opening), emphasizing first inversion formation and the doubling of the third in the treble clef. The shapes overlap, forming a condensed sequence that chromatically elaborates the Grundgestalt. The sequence rises chromatically until m. 42, when the motive is reduced and repeated in the treble clef while the bass rises chromatically from Bb to Db (reinforcing yet again the flexible function of these pitches). The repeated half-step motion in the soprano emphasizes Ab, which becomes the starting point for a climactic string of overlapping motives in mm. 43-46. The sweeping shape of this motion resembles mm. 8-9 and 21-22, yet it is clear from the groupings of notes that these shapes are more directly derived from the rhythmic motives of the Grundgestalt (outlined in Fig. 2-2). During this climactic sweep, the same cross-relations that we have seen throughout the piece are emphasized as the harmony moves from an apparent Db7 chord (functioning as an augmented 6th) to a C7 chord (dominant's dominant). The diminished octave jumps at the bottom of each sweep (Cb-C, Bb-B) are striking. The harmonic movement from C-Bb in the Grundgestalt is recalled, but Brahms is enharmonically filling in the gap between them, showing us how flexible these pitches can be. While the rising motion in m. 46 clearly outlines a C7 chord, the appearance of the B-natural as a chromatic passing tone is not to be ignored. As we have seen from the beginning, Brahms does not use ornamental tones without considering their harmonic implications. In this case, the B-natural becomes the #4 of the dominant region. When spelled as Cb, it operates as the neapolitan of the tonic (leading similarly to the dominant).
The sweeping motion peaks at the end of m. 46 with a breathtaking reinterpretation of the shape first seen in m. 22 (marking the arrival of the B section). The chord shapes are outlined by half-step movements converging on C (Db-C from above, B-C from below). The harmony, which appears to function firmly as the dominant’s dominant, suddenly contracts into a diminished 9th chord (also with C as root). This motion could be interpreted as a brief neutralization of the essential cross-related pitches, but it could also function as a diminished vii7 chord of the mediant region. At every opportunity, Brahms seems to be telling us that no harmonic path is fixed.

Measures 48-51 outline a clear dominant chord with a beautiful melodic descent in the soprano that starts from Db and eventually lands on Bb in m. 52, beginning a near-identical recapitulation of the first A section. When the recapitulation begins, it feels both natural and completely unexpected. The dominant harmony contracts in m. 51 to form an F diminished chord, and the 3-2-2-1 motion from the grundgestalt becomes 3-b2-b2-1. The first inversion tonic chord that we would expect in m. 52 is now spelled like a first inversion Bb7, with a D-natural in the bass.

By carefully altering certain pitches (indicated in mm. 52-54 above), Brahms accomplishes a kind of harmonic blurring that makes us unaware that we are experiencing a recapitulation until it is already several measures underway. From mm. 55-61, things proceed just as they did in the opening section. We have returned, yet there is still very little evidence to convince us that we are in the tonic key of Bb minor.

In mm. 60-61, the Grundgestalt returns in its original form, but the return is deceptive, as the tonality moves briefly towards the neopolitan region. The expected circle of fifths progression now starts on a third inversion Gb dominant chord, which functions as the dominant of the neopolitan. At the end of m. 63, the surprising vertical alignment of a minor third (C-natural and Eb as part of a third inversion Ab dominant chord) marks a brief motion back to the mediant region. The Gb in the bass now begins a chromatic descent through multiple augmented sixth chords to land squarely on a root position B7 chord. Harmonically, it would appear that we have moved further than ever from the tonic region, yet the B major tonality can easily be interpreted as a respelling of the previous neopolitan chords, with an added A-natural (the leading tone to the tonic).
Measures 67-71 contain varied repetitions of the shape first seen in m. 7. This climactic chain of reductions brings the final A section to a close as the B7 chord (acting as neopolitan) is transformed dramatically into the dominant. There is still much work to be done, however, before we would feel at rest with a tonic resolution. The chromatic descent in the soprano in mm. 70-72 brings us neither to the tonic minor nor the mediant major, but instead to a first inversion D-minor chord, which uses the same motion at the entry of the B section to descend to a second inversion B major chord (continuing the dominant harmony).

At this point, a coda begins, which can be interpreted as a long dominant-tonic resolution during which time the melodic motion of the grundgestalt is varied over a repeated E-F pedal figure (also coming directly from the Grundgestalt). The harmony in the upper voices oscillates gently and naturally between the tonic major, mediant major, and dominant regions. By working through the tonal problem, Brahms has prepared us for a situation in which the tonic, mediant, and dominant regions can all coexist simultaneously. As the piece comes to a close, the dominant chord steps one last time through the mediant in m. 82 before reaching the first and only root position tonic chord of the entire work.

CODA:
In an interview with himself, Glenn Gould said he liked the Brahms Intermezzi for their “atmosphere of improvisation.” For some, the designation of a work as “improvised” makes theoretical analysis irrelevant. However, if the above analysis has any validity, it is obvious that this work displays a masterfully complex, yet integrated sense of thematic, motivic, and harmonic development. Perhaps, then, the most highly developed tonal compositions, because of their multi-layered integration, will necessarily induce a feeling of improvisation. Or perhaps the most highly developed improvisations achieve a kind of multi-layered integration that “composed” music can never quite reach. At the very least, we can conclude that this piece illuminates many fascinating issues that were hardly touched upon during Brahms’ lifetime.