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Bach, Barber, and Brahms: Masters of Emotive Violin Composition

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BACH, BARBER, AND BRAHMS: MASTERS OF EMOTIVE VIOLIN COMPOSITION

by

Edward Charity

B.M., Northwestern State University, 2011.

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Edward Charity

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

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TITLE: BACH, BARBER, AND BRAHMS: MASTERS OF EMOTIVE VIOLIN COMPOSITION

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Michael Barta

Three seminal works of the violin repertory will be examined: J.S. Bach's *Sonata no. 2 in a minor BWV 1003*, Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto*, op. 14, and Johannes Brahms' *Sonata no. 3 in d minor*. Each work will be placed into the necessary historical context, and traits of the works that could be attempts by the composer to express things beyond music will be investigated. Through performance of these masterworks I came to see them as very similar expressions, from three similar geniuses, of things that human beings have always felt. All three works could be said to have a sad character, so the treatment and division given by the different men from different eras to the balance of major and minor will be loosely compared through the chapters.

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CHAPTER 1

SONATA NO. 2 IN A MINOR, BWV 1003

J. S. Bach was still by today's standards a young man when he penned the *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin solo*. As a 35 year old working a five year contract in the central German town of Köthen, Bach was already established as a prolific composer. In 1720, Bach's first wife of twelve years and mother of his two eldest children died, leaving Bach a widower. His employ as *Kapellmeister* to the court of Leopold, Prince of Anhalt, involved no duties as church organist or choir director, which allowed Bach copious amounts of time for other forms of composition. During the early 1720's an astounding number of Bach's still exalted instrumental works were composed, including: the six suites for unaccompanied cello, the Brandenburg concertos, volume I of *The Well Tempered Clavier*, collections of his two and three part inventions, and the *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato*. Every endeavor from this period into a given discipline resulted in Bach crafting a true masterwork in each, all before there was a body of literature to base such a standard on.

Bach, although typically thought of as a keyboard player, cannot be underestimated as a violinist. No man that had any less than the highest level of mastery on an instrument could possibly compose anything as perfectly within the idiom as these pieces are for the violin. They provide an extraordinary level of challenge to any performer, but in that challenge is also the tantalizing knowledge of complete feasibility. Even as they approach 300-years of age (although the first century was spent almost entirely in obscurity) these *Sei Sonate* are still one of the first serious benchmarks for a developing violinist progressing through the repertory. The collection

is split into three Sonatas and three Partitas, with each set of three using a standardized movement structure. The genres for the two groups of three are the *sonata da camera* (for the Sonatas) and the *sonata da chiesa* (for the Partitas). The *sonata da chiesa* was a collection of dance movements, and the *sonata da camera* a more structured slow-fugue-slow-fast movement work. The collection also makes use of a logical progression of tonal centers for the six (G, a, b, C, d, E), which is not surprising from Bach since other similar collections for other instruments have the same characteristic. In the *sonatas* it is generally thought that the order in difficulty (at least of the fugue) corresponds directly to the number given by the composer.¹

The violin's tuning affected the ability of Bach to compose in the keys chosen, and although he called for *scordatura* in other works for the instrument (most famously in the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 1*) none of the sonatas or partitas ask for alternate tuning. In the A minor Sonata Bach had many sonorous chord options at his disposal that are idiomatic for the instrument, and his use of open strings in chords also gave the violinist a better chance to properly execute the multiple-stop notes, giving full tone to each member of the chord. The polyphonic writing in the Sonatas was something that resulted from a progression of composers (Matteis, Schmelzer, Biber) that tested the limits of multiple voicing on just one instrument, but Bach's own endeavor far surpassed any of those previous works.²

The first movement of the Sonata No. 2 has a number of similarities to the G minor Sonata No.1. The *Grave* tempo marking is expected due the highly melismatic

¹ Eun-Ho Kim, "Formal Coherence in J.S. Bach's Three Sonatas for Solo Violin, BWV 1001,1003, and 1005." (MM Thesis University of Cincinnati, 2005).

² Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, *The Bach reader: a life of Johann Sebastian Bach in letters and documents*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 31.

and quasi-improvisational style of the first movement. Under the decorative faster notes, Bach outlines the harmonic motion using a steadily moving bass line. Often the actual motion of this alternate bass voice is somewhat hidden within the moving melodic notes, but the performer has ample opportunity to highlight these pitches using subtle agogic or dynamic accents so that the voice leading is not lost in the texture. One of the reoccurring harmonic tendencies of this sonata is the constant and abrupt modulation between minor and major modes. When considering the most substantial cadences of the first movement, for example, Bach quickly moved away from A minor toward its relative major C as early as bar 3, with a very strong cadence on C in bar 7. Immediately following this, the mode completely shifts back to A minor as if to ensure the listener hadn't been too fooled by this extended moment of positivity.

The resumption of A minor lasts for a number of bars (which at *Grave* translates into minutes of playing), with the second strong cadence occurring, after a number of false cadences, on E minor in bar 12. The next five bars are the least stable harmonically of the movement, and during this period it is hard not to feel as if Bach was deliberately weighing his key options, before settling strongly and moving towards the final cadences. The D minor cadence in bar 16 1/2, especially strong because of the leading tone trill a beat before, abruptly switches back to the major mode for a few beats before the bass line begins to powerfully reassert itself with the familiar downward motion used at the outset of the *Grave*. This time the chords placed above the bass increase the dissonance and ambiguity using two types of 7th chord, but ultimately the reappearance of G# as leading tone in bar 18 settles the direction of the movement firmly towards A minor. Even so, Bach resisted this eventuality until the bitter end, with

an additional false cadence on beat three of bar 20 (on the painfully close to tonic d#⁰⁷ chord without f#) before finally giving the audience what they expect a measure later on A minor. With just a moment of expected resolution, Bach used the final two and a half bars of the *Grave* as lead in material to the real centerpiece of the Sonata (as in each of the others), the fugue.³

The *Fuga* truly begins in the last measure of the *Grave*. The half-cadence ending of the movement comes as quite a surprise, but as the fugue was typically the highlight of a *sonata da camera* it seems fitting that the movement would begin seamlessly. The fugue subject is one of the simplest and shortest that Bach used in all of his major fugue works. The subject is also well within the violin's idiom, using two open string notes (not necessarily to be played open) and many interval patterns that are well suited to the instrument. At 289 bars, this A minor fugue is one of the longest Bach composed, but formally it is one of the most dense and difficult to divide.⁴ Instead of marking clear divisions between subject statements and episodes, Bach used many elisions and much less predictable sequences to keep the fugue feeling more through composed. Long periods of sequencing between voices carry the harmony upwards or downwards often in this movement, and Bach's almost tiresome use of small melodic fragments from the original subject show his real potential for expansion of a singular idea into a long form composition.⁵

In this movement another unique facet of this Sonata appears for the first time. Bach marked very few dynamics in the Sonatas and Partitas, as would be expected of

³ Kim, "Formal Coherence in J.S. Bach's Three Sonatas."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jaap Schröder, *Bach's solo violin works: a performer's guide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 102.

the time, and the composer typically favored that performers base their dynamic decisions on the given character and tide of the piece. In this fugue Bach for the most part left this dynamic decision up to the violinist, but for one particular section (bars 47-59) he gave direct instructions. This is actually the first (and almost only) instance in the original manuscript facsimile of a dynamic being specifically given by Bach.⁶ The dynamics make sense; each statement is made twice in almost exact repetition, once *forte*, once *piano*. The reason as to why Bach chose this marking is possibly explained in the final *Allegro*, when this same device (repetition of a measure at contrasting dynamics) is used again extensively. The foreshadowing of this deliberate terracing, directed by the composer himself, serves to link not just the fugue to the finale, but also to the Sonata as a whole, where this reoccurring abruptness in many forms (harmonic, melodic, dynamic) is a central theme.

The tonal centers in this movement match those explored in the *Grave* to a great degree, but this comes as no surprise based on the standard practices of the day. More interesting is the characterization of the sections and their given tonalities. Bach found ways to not only structurally and harmonically craft an engaging polyphonic fugue for a typically single-voiced instrument, but he also managed to give that fugue a distinctively conversational tone. This “conversation” is certainly minor in character for most of the movement. Each voice has its own point to prove and many times the disagreement seems to almost boil over in intensity. These fiery exchanges between voices are always counterbalanced by long sections of seeming politeness shared through major tonalities. As in the *Grave*, the mood swings in the *Fuga* are abrupt, but

⁶ Johann Sebastian Bach and Ivan Galamian, *6 sonatas and partitas for violin solo* (New York: International Music Company, 1971).

always completely supported harmonically. As occurred in the first movement, two large transitory sections of this fugue have the distinct feeling of being harmonically lost. Bach's limitations on where he could direct the harmony seem boundless, and to plot every point of harmonic arrival out would reduce the majesty of this fugue through over-dissection, but it is logical to link these harmonic "exploratory" sections to the composer's own indecision as to which path was the best moving forward. Always these periods end with a very strong resumption of a more or less expected tonality, but the extended length of time Bach took to find these paths is an essential component of this fugue (and the sonata as a whole).

An especially interesting example of this exploration occurs towards the end of the movement. After a long period of searching, the fugue arrives at one of the most supported cadences of the piece, on D minor. This introduces Bb as an important pitch, which continues to assert itself tonally for almost 30 bars. Eventually G# reappears in the bass in direct conflict to this prolonged episode moving between F, d, and Bb, but it's almost as if Bach refused to give up on Bb being an integral part of the fugue's ending sequence. The reconciliation found by Bach occurs in bar 269 of the movement, when the Bb acts as root for a Neapolitan chord leading back to the dominant of E major, only to cadence back at A minor two bars later. From here Bach allowed the end to come, but not before another false cadence (with a breath mark for added effect indicated in the facsimile) and a counter-statement of the original fugue subject exclusively in inversion interject for the last ten bars of the work. This inverted form had been previously used during episodes, but the insistence on it here at the end could indicate Bach's conclusion that a change in thinking had taken place at some

point during the fugue, as if one voice succeeded in winning the argument. In the penultimate bar the subject motive is still voiced (in the central line) and a Picardy third reasserts the idea that somehow after all the minor debate, a major compromise was reached at the movement's close.

Finishing in major not only indicates a friendly end to a spirited exchange in the fugue, but also sets the stage for a beautifully composed soliloquy and light accompaniment to be played simultaneously by the violin in the *Andante*. The melodic line does come across as a somewhat private expression of beauty or love, which is why the term soliloquy seems to fit its character so well. The violinist takes a pause from all the high drama and difficulty of the minor surrounding movements and offers this slower, more personal and positive statement. The bass style used in this movement is one heard often in Bach, but this consistent pulsing accompaniment is used only in this movement for the Six Sonatas and Partitas. Bow technique and bow construction from this period allowed players to execute movements with dexterity and agility, so Bach was well within his rights as a composer to demand the violinist not only sustain a legato melody in the upper voice, but also provide a separated, even pointed articulation for the bass notes. Four voice chords are only used at major cadence points so that any extra time needed to ensure all voices are heard can be taken.

The form of the *Andante* is as simple as the fugue's was convoluted. A C major key area outlines two main themes accompanied by a number of sequenced harmonic bridges using motives found in those themes. The A section ends with a half cadence and the first time repeats back by way of a first ending, with a pulse in the bass that only briefly settles on G. After the second execution, the half cadence marks a true end

to the pleasant major tonality. The second main section begins with a variation of the first theme played at the expected second key area of G minor. To maintain a connection to the other sonata movements, Bach included one of the aforementioned false cadences. This moment is a bit of a surprise each time it is played in the second half, as its placement just after the main climax of the section (prior to the final cadence) tends to heighten the audience's expectation of a normal, stronger harmonic resolution. Instead, Bach moved down a whole step from the expected E minor to the transitory D minor, which over the final eight bars of the movement moves stepwise back to G major, allowing the listener to feel at home in the major sonority until the *Andante's* close.

The final movement of the Sonata is the fast paced, almost etude-like *Allegro*. Each of the three Sonatas have this type of characteristic finale, although each also has its own distinguishing quality. This seems to match the creative mindset of Bach at this point in his life, and is a quality mirrored in the other instrumental masterworks put forth during this period. Each genre explored was composed for as would be customary for the era built on the beginnings of later accepted standards, but within that adherence to the rules Bach wanted to explore distinct variations within those forms. For these last movements Bach chose to use similar arpeggios and scale patterns, but at the same time he altered some core element of each different finale to provide distinction. In the G minor sonata, Bach chose a compound meter and is rhythmically consistent to an extreme (only switching from 16th notes at the two final section cadences). In the C major, Bach instructed the player to slur many more notes than in any of the other

sonata movements, in addition to writing in many arpeggios that necessitate frequent string crossing (in preview to the E major *Preludio*).

In this A minor finale, Bach used notes faster than sixteenths played without slur, which adds an additional challenge of agility to the performer, but also adds the potential for a new kind of excitement in the fast movement. As was previously mentioned, he also began each of the large sections with a short period of alternating dynamic levels by measure before eventually settling into a *forte*, with fluctuations made in adherence with the musical line. The only other dynamic indication occurs in the last three bars of the piece, when a *piano* is marked just after one last jarring false cadence. To accomplish this sudden change the performer is almost forced to make a complete break in the rhythmic flow, which paired with the harmonic intensity of the moment serves to completely alter the character of the Sonata's end. Whether or not Bach intended another *crescendo* for the closing cadence is left unclear, possibly to allow each performer his own decision as to what the ultimate remark of the Sonata would be.

Taken as a whole the six Sonatas and Partitas can be overwhelming; violinists can dedicate decades to learning and mastering all six, and one's own conception of the body of work's real meaning likely shifts with time and experience. As a demonstration of the violin's potential for not just melodic expression but also harmonic support there are no better examples than Bach's. When executed with the proper amount of discretion, coupled with a level of sensitivity appropriate for works so masterful, any one of the six can stand as the centerpiece for a major public performance.

CHAPTER 2

VIOLIN CONCERTO OP. 14

Until recently the exact genesis of Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto*, op. 14 was not entirely clear. Letters written during the commission and negotiation between the rising American composer Barber and a benefactor for the young Ukrainian violinist Iso Briselli have only within the past few years helped to clarify the controversial subject. Barber and Briselli were members of the first class of graduates from the Curtis Institute in 1933 (Barber began his studies a year before Briselli in 1924). Both students began their studies in Philadelphia while teenagers, so after graduation they were still young men. Briselli (the youngest student of Carl Flesch⁷) was in America due to the support of Philadelphia philanthropist Samuel Fels, an avid classical music lover and supporter. The thought behind the concerto, a commission paid by Fels, was that it could boost the reputation of both men through collaboration and a guaranteed premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra (with whom Briselli had debuted at age 14). Barber took the project with him to Switzerland in 1939 where he planned to compose the whole work, although the U.S. call for nationals to escape Europe in the build up to World War II disrupted this choice of environment. Barber ultimately completed two movements of the concerto and submitted them a few weeks after the scheduled October 1 deadline, but that was still early enough that Briselli had ample time to learn and appraise the work.⁸

⁷ Elizabeth Ruth Flood, "Analysis, Interpretation and Performance of the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra by Samuel Barber" (Honors Thesis, Butler University, 1997).

⁸ "Iso Briselli, Samuel Barber, & the Violin Concerto, op. 14-Facts and Fiction," <http://www.isobriselli.com/>, accessed April 3, 2014.

It was at this point that the concerto began to run into difficulties. Briselli was coached in New York by Albert Meiff, who was in more frequent contact with the original benefactor Fels than his student Briselli was. His interpretation of the work was that it was not written in a violinistic way, and that his real concern was for Briselli's reputation if he performed the work in public.⁹ To anyone familiar with the piece this may not be too surprising, as the Barber concerto is significantly less challenging than most of the more major Romantic violin concertos in the standard repertory. The musical value of the concerto cannot be questioned, but from a technical or virtuosic standpoint it doesn't give the soloist enough time to freely demonstrate enough diverse techniques. These statements were also made prior to a tangible third movement being attached to the concerto, which is by far the most difficult of the three movements.

Briselli did stand by Barber for much of this debate over the first and second movements, but upon reception of the third movement things soured between the two. Briselli was of the opinion that the movement lacked substance in comparison with the rest of the concerto (even calling it "lightweight"), and advised Barber to extend the development section of the piece in order to improve the stature of the finale in comparison with finales from the other concertos in his repertoire. Earlier accounts from Barber's biographer Nathan Broder point to complaints based on difficulty as the reason for Briselli's requests, although this is incorrect. This mistaken account was the eventual source of much of the controversy surrounding the concerto. In reality, Barber was nervous about the playability of the movement before giving it to Briselli, so he requested a trial be put on at Curtis before a small audience of friends and colleagues, including Gian Carlo Menotti and the school's founder Mary Louise Curtis Bok. A

⁹ Ibid.

student at Curtis, Herbert Baumel¹⁰, was given two hours to learn a section of the 3rd movement of the concerto from the pencil manuscript and told he was to perform it “very fast” in the mock audition.¹¹

After this successful first run through the 3rd movement, it was handed over to Briselli who made the aforementioned remarks as to its lack of substance. Barber took the concerto back from him, and in the composer's own words, “we decided to abandon the project, with no hard feelings on either side.”¹² After receiving the concerto back from Briselli, Barber continued to adjust the composition and even affectionately began to call the work the *concerto del sapone*, or the “soap concerto” due to its dramatic, soap opera like first years in existence as well as a play on words in reference to the Fels soap empire.¹³ Ultimately Baumel was given what may have been the second real opportunity to perform the concerto, again in a private performance, but this time with the Curtis Orchestra under Fritz Reiner. The work was also tested by Oscar Shumsky, who it seems also passed on the right to truly premiere the concerto. Finally in August of 1940, Barber showed the completed work to American violinist Albert Spalding who agreed to take the piece unquestioningly, and the premiere was held in February of 1941 with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra.¹⁴ To complete the story of Baumel's involvement, it is necessary to mention that he was the violinist used in rehearsals with the Philadelphia Orchestra prior to Spalding's arrival.¹⁵

¹⁰ Mr. Baumel actually went on to play First Violin in the Philadelphia Orchestra during WWII and later became the concertmaster for the original Broadway run and original cast recording of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

¹¹ “Iso Briselli, Samuel Barber, & the Violin Concerto.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: the composer and his music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 194.

¹⁴ “Iso Briselli, Samuel Barber, & the Violin Concerto.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

Whatever place the concerto held just after its composition, there is no debate now as to its place among the great 20th century concertos for the violin. While its character is firmly rooted in Romantic textures and melodies, there are assorted examples of Barber's willingness to use a more expanded, modern compositional palette. Barber's early career is typically categorized as a perfect example of the "neo-Romantic" style, and the composer himself was proud of the fact that he and close friend Gian Carlo Menotti stayed clear of the cerebral music of his contemporaries. Brahms was Barber's chief idol during this period of his life, and although many of his early Curtis compositions from this time (the late 1920's) were lost, admirers of the young composer said the music resembled closely that of Brahms. The *Violin Concerto* was somewhat of a turning point for the 29-year-old composer, and what makes the concerto a lasting success is the blend Barber managed to find between the old and new in terms of compositional style, as well as the emotive content that the still young Barber was determined to make central to his concerto.¹⁶

Numerous concertos from the century preceding the Barber did away with the double exposition sonata-form first movement, so the fact that this concerto starts with soloist and orchestra playing together is not revolutionary. What is of note is that Barber chose to use the soloist almost exclusively as a melodic voice, not asking for almost any kind of virtuosity other than one pattern run, for the entire first theme's statement (around two minutes of music). Barber and Briselli both felt the strength of this concerto was in the message given by the notes, and Barber clearly understood that challenging passages were not needed to set the desired overall tone for the piece.

¹⁶ Howard Pollack, "Samuel Barber, Jean Sibelius, and the Making of American Romantic," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (2000): 175-205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742563>, accessed March 29, 2014.

The exposition begins with a very rich violin line, but over the course of the first section the themes lose warmth and security. A constant shifting between major and minor was to be expected from Barber, and certainly these modulations are an essential aspect of the exposition and development of the first movement. The true second theme is introduced in the orchestra while the violin rests, and it takes its character from the rhythm used (16th dotted 8th, followed by two 8th notes), which has been said to give the concerto a certain “Scottish” sound at this moment. Following this interlude, a section of arpeggiated harmonic searching with pseudo-Scottish rhythm in the violin solo leads back to a changed version of the opening theme, this time played by the orchestra. Barber then begins a playful major tonality transitional section, played off the string and constantly accelerating to an impressive virtuoso outburst leading up to the final climax of the exposition.¹⁷

The second large section of the movement begins with an abrupt harmonic shift, this time into a minor tonality that seems much more rigid than the major tonality of the early exposition. Barber is surely aware that his eventual goal for the development is in a stirring, virtuoso climax, probably in a major key, but to amplify the effect of this climax he decides to keep both soloist and orchestra in a nebulous, albeit minor, tonal center for long enough to unsettle the listener. Themes and motives are taken from the preceding content in the concerto, but always only hinted at, never in full statement. All aspects of the development lend themselves to the creation of a “lost” feeling; the harmonies slowly shift and never settle, and melodies are cut short from their expected, previously heard full statements. This was nothing new, many composers chose to pair a soulful, lyric exposition with this type of contemplative, unsure development, but with

¹⁷ Flood, “Analysis, Interpretation and Performance of the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra by Samuel Barber.”

Barber's concerto it feels as though this change in tone is due to some type of profound doubt held by the composer, not just because of some standard practice or form.

Although this concerto was not a war tribute, and it was largely completed long before any of the events of World War II had time to settle into the conscience of the world, it could be said that Barber was expressing an early form of the grief and sorrow that would one day be felt due to events of his time.

Slowly over the course of the development, the use of the minor or major second as a vehicle for dissonance and harmonic stretching begins to phase out as some of the themes from the exposition begin to enter again in fuller form, most notably an excerpt from the initial violin melody, this time played as an arpeggiated quasi-obligato figure in the accompaniment. The violin solo too begins to find its original themes again, until ultimately all voices are joined together at the largest D major climax of the movement, the awaited and deserved release of the slowly built development tension and angst. The violin solo is allowed to rest while the accompanying voices restate the first theme at fullest volume, adding warmth and depth simply through the additional voices and octaves being heard that the solo violin could not provide alone. This return to the major character is an almost exact restatement of the exposition, with only a violin melody raised at the octave and a different harmonic resolution setting it apart from the first statement.

The movement progresses in identical fashion, other than key area, and a similar tide in the music once again removes the warmth and embracing quality of Barber's masterful melody. The most strikingly different aspect of the movement's close is the added drama of an abrupt *cadenza* for the violin. Once again it is apparent that

Barber's interest in the violin as soloist is due to the expressive and lyric techniques available to the instrument rather than for its virtuosic capabilities. The cadenza is a combination of two rhythmic and melodic patterns found in the movement; one used as descending material from the third octave Db, and the other to ascend from the open G that serves as the arrival and turning point of the brief moment.

The descending figure's rhythm (two eighths with a triplet following) is an excerpt from the opening melody, as well as one of the motives that has appeared throughout the movement. The ascending line is less forceful and dramatic, but more interesting in its harmonic character and multiple levels of relation to the rest of the concerto. Five pitches make up the pattern, a number that clearly Barber was determined to make integral, and the ascent is by fourth exclusively, with the last pitch a half step down from the penultimate and a third above the next pattern's start. Quartal motion had been used previously in the *animando* sections of the movement, but for the cadenza Barber chose to overlay the quartal sound onto the quintuple rhythm and shape found in the development's climax. The line is marked *diminuendo molto* and *largamente*, which serves to once again take a climactic moment and slowly unravel it into something much less certain.

After this out of character outburst from the violin Barber settles back into what ends up being the most relaxed theme from the movement, the Scottish styled figure. Although it couldn't have been apparent beforehand, keen listeners might notice the close relation of this Scottish theme to the preceding cadenza, namely in that the shapes of these two lines are almost identical. The cadenza's placement so near to this theme that had been missing since the exposition must have been an attempt by

Barber to highlight this similarity, and the mirror image quality (the ascending cadenza line is the retrograde of the Scottish) of the two lines is a good example of Barber crafting his music using some more contemporary techniques.

The first movement's ending character is resumed immediately in the slow movement of the concerto. The *Andante* begins with an orchestra solo for more than the first quarter of the movement. Many instruments play the first theme or a variation on it, and the music manages to stay somewhere between peaceful and sad. Barber's choice to leave the violin out of the entire exposition shows great discretion from the young composer, and the overall tone and orchestral color allowed to form due to the violin's absence is truly one of the masterful traits of this slow movement. The violin's entrance is through another quasi-improvisational ascending melody, again made up of five notes and using a 2/3's elongated form of the opening theme rhythm from the first movement.

The violin's function as a source of drama and as equal voice to the orchestra is maintained during this second movement, and the peacefully somber tone set by the orchestra in the first section is shifted quickly by the solo voice in the second. Barber also indicated that the original *andante* tempo should begin to feel *alla breve* for much of the B section for this second ternary movement of the concerto. The ebb and flow that featured prominently in the first movement is used with a bit more subtlety in this slow movement, but especially during the development the violin follows a very clear dynamic rise and fall. Just before the return of the exposition themes, Barber heightened the expectation and theater by having the soloist play a series of larger-than-octave intervals, eventually adding double-stops and markings of *affrettando*, all

leading to a *lunga fermata* at a loud dynamic just before the A¹ section. During the exposition the *espressivo* oboe melody is played with an air of nostalgia or loss, but upon its return the solo violin transforms the theme into a luscious, *sul-g, molto espressivo* moment of tenderness or profound love.

The penultimate utterance of the violin after a long period of building is another cadenza very similar in composition to the comparable passage in the first movement. This time the line is finished with more conviction, and the soloist holds intensity and dynamic until it is taken by the accompaniment. The closing violin theme is a restatement of an earlier idea from the initial solo entry of the movement, this time played *piano* and as a defeated closing remark. Since the third movement of the concerto is of such a different character to the first two it can be assumed that whatever issue Barber was attempting to clarify was settled in some form here at the end of the slow movement. It would seem that the outcome was not as positive as listeners and performers may have hoped at the inception of the work.

The *Presto in moto perpetuo* is prone to underestimation of its musical value, and although the violin plays nothing but constant triplet eighth notes for all but the last sixteen bars of the piece, it is remarkable how much detail and variety Barber is able to work into the solo part. The movement is a *rondo* formally and the violin dominates the sparse accompaniment, and is also responsible for all statements of the refrain and episodes until near the end of the work. A variety of virtuoso methods for playing running notes are called for, but since these notes never stop or change rhythm it is understandable why a violinist like Iso Briselli would claim that the movement lacks substance. Now that the entire 20th century of Western art-music can be quantified,

and compositions can be weighed based on their past success as well as lasting value, it is safe to say that although Barber's conception for this movement was one-dimensional (to a degree), in its proper context it serves as the perfect finale for one of the greatest 20th century works for the violin.

To keep the movement interesting and to preserve some of the linking qualities for the entire work, Barber made extensive use of accents and unexpected meter changes to keep the tide of notes from becoming too predictable. To emphasize this desire for unpredictable and difficult to follow beat patterns, Barber deliberately wrote long stretches of the movement offset from being on beat by one triplet eighth. Typically a soloist would find it hard to resist the urge to emphasize and give away the actual beat, but Barber makes no accent indications to support this tendency, so it can be assumed he wanted the *grazioso* sections that use this technique to remain a bit disjointed. True to the concerto's overall character, the movement is constantly in motion between the extremes of the violin's dynamic range. The technique used to play the triplet figures is a quite short, almost off the string stroke of the bow, so even at *pianissimo* the violin manages to speak and cut through the orchestration. Barber does well to keep the accompaniment very thin throughout. In contrast to the violin's unchanging rhythm, however, the accompanying voices provide assorted patterns in hemiola as well as on or off the beat emphases.

The tempo marking for the movement is a blistering 192 beats per minute, and for the entire movement no voice moves faster than the constantly flowing triplets in the violin. As the perfect send off, at the very end of the movement the violin moves up a level in speed to running sixteenth's with no change in tempo. This final challenge of

both endurance and agility requires the soloist to choose a tempo right from the start that will make it possible to execute this final outburst with precision. Briselli and Meiff were justified in accusing the concerto of lacking a distinct secondary character, but Barber was brilliant in creating a movement, truly constant in motion, that manages to show such a diverse array of variations on the one character and the many different ways a competent violinist can play continuously all over the instrument.

CHAPTER 3

SONATA IN D MINOR, OP. 108

Among the greatest works of chamber music composed during the late 19th century, few pieces have remained as frequently performed as the 3rd violin and piano sonata of Johannes Brahms. This monument of the violin repertory is the last composition written for the violin as soloist by the composer, and took a number of years to complete. After successfully composing all four of his symphonies Brahms turned back to chamber music, and during the latter half of the 1880's he composed prolifically. The sonata was started in 1886, set aside to allow for composition of the Double Concerto for violin and cello, and was ultimately completed in 1888. Brahms dedicated the sonata to his friend and colleague Hans von Bulow, and Jenő Hubay premiered it with Brahms at the piano in Budapest in the winter of 1888. While not the first to publicly perform the work, Joseph Joachim was Brahms' real reason for composing the sonata. Joachim and Brahms' friendship had waned earlier in the decade in the wake of Joachim's divorce (where Brahms testified against the violinist, calling him a jealous husband), but this sonata, along with the Double Concerto, was intended as a peace offering from the composer.¹⁸

The sonata's four movement structure was not customary for a sonata of this period, but this form had been seen in some of Brahms' earlier pieces, so it was not wholly unusual. The movements share an extraordinary amount of thematic and harmonic material, and can easily be interpreted as being representative of a singular

¹⁸ Richard Fischer, *Brahms' technique of motive development in his sonata in D minor opus 108 for piano and violin* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1964), 8.

idea or emotion translated into a variety of forms. Brahms' music has no specific program, but from numerous examples in his oeuvre an appreciator of his style can easily discern that some specific thought was typically in the forefront of his conception for a given work. Each of his four symphonies has this character, some unstated purpose, and as this sonata comes from the fully matured Brahms it is safe to assume that similar goals were had for its composition. Brahms was a complicated, talented, intelligent man, and from a mind such as his it can be assumed that complex human dilemmas would be investigated in his works.¹⁹

The Sonata no. 3 is the only minor sonata of the three Brahms composed for the violin, and its character from the outset is more contemplative and involved than the G or A major's. The technical demands made by the composer also set it apart from the other sonatas, and although all three works were written well after the D major concerto, only the D minor sonata asks for a similar level of skillfulness from the solo violin. That is not to say that this sonata is a virtuoso piece, as one would regard the concerto; instead, the technical demands serve only to elevate the overall chamber music intensity that be created with just two instruments. The importance of both parts to the sonata cannot be understated, and both instruments equally share the burden of soloist and accompanist.²⁰

The opening of the first movement immediately sets both players at odds, with the piano starting on a quietly driving *ostinato* figure to balance against the violin's soaring *sotto voce* first theme. This accompaniment pattern not only reappears during

¹⁹ Johannes Brahms, Styra Avins, and Josef Eisinger, *Johannes Brahms: life and letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xxvii.

²⁰ Melvin Berger, *Guide to the Sonatas: Music for One or Two Instruments* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 77.

restatements of this first theme, but also manifests itself during the development section of the movement with the violin playing both melody and accompaniment simultaneously with an oscillating figure between two strings. Imitation between instruments is throughout in the exposition, and the piano introduces as many melodies and themes as the violinist in this first movement. The themes themselves are closely related and generally are derived in some form or another from the opening four bars of the violin melody.²¹

The first movement is in sonata form and follows the normal formal structure quite closely, as if only because of expectation. Two main subjects make up the exposition/recapitulation and surround a relatively short development section, of just 46 bars. This development combines the melodic and harmonic writing from the exposition to highlight the interplay that may have been covered by the solo violin earlier in the movement. Smaller melodic fragments are used more obviously as 4 bar bridges between the unison sections, but Brahms also hid the theme one motive in one of the violin's juxtaposed voices. During the recapitulation the previously used *codetta* becomes a bridge into a more substantial *coda* that includes full restatements of the first theme and a second instance of the oscillating unison figure. This *coda* begins with the final climax of the *Allegro* (the first theme in a full *forte*), but quickly loses that intensity and returns to the main voice used in the movement, the *sotto voce*, resigned tone so fitting to D minor.

The first movement sets a decisive tone for the work as a whole. The resolution of the drama is neither satisfying nor comforting. The defeated, descending violin

²¹ Ibid.

restatements of the opening two bars over the still constantly moving piano bass make for an unsettling final cadence. As if completely aware of the probable emotional state of his audience, Brahms decides to release all of that tension with a second movement that uses many of the same devices to produce the exact opposite emotional effect. The form of the movement is very simple; Brahms only real goal was to showcase the beautifully crafted melody. The two main melodic statements are linked by two types of transition figure, the first of which becomes the major climax of each large section. The second transitional figure is of a complete other character from the rest of the movement. The figure is related to the first movement, and the interval of a 4th is used in a variety of forms. Eventually the violin is left to rest during this transition while the piano works its way back to the original theme of the movement.

This moment of doubt, the second transition, fits in well with the idea that this sonata as a whole is meant to illustrate the conflicted state of its composer. Music's ability to convey emotions in an abstract way means that the specific worry of Brahms might be forever lost to his own mind, but any listener that has felt a similar way will surely understand the dilemma set forth at least in its most essential form.

This episode is but a moment in this short movement however, and to comfort his audience Brahms embellishes the original second movement melody upon its return using a higher register in the violin and an exuberant accompaniment pattern that was absent during the first statement. The *sul g* customary playing of large sections of the slow movement, although not indicated by the composer, seems to be an essential part of the piece's lasting character. This vocalizing effect along with the building intensity (and register) of the recycled transitional material allow for the solo violin to swell to a

powerful emotional climax at the final *forte*. Not only does Brahms call for a 3rd much higher in register than is normally required (outside virtuoso works), he also alters the rhythm of the preceding arpeggios to further heighten the audience's awareness that something important is about to happen. After these repeat climaxes the *Adagio* finishes on a soft note, like in the *Allegro*, but the overwhelming major tonality is maintained until the movement's end.

The third movement's humor and rhythmic toying are appropriate for what would be a true *scherzo* in any larger scale work, but Brahms' tempo marking leaves the performer in a bit of doubt. *Un poco presto e con sentimento* indicates that this playful tune may in fact be a disguise for something less obvious and less amusing, also indicated by its F# minor tonality. At the outset the movement the writing is almost exactly what one would anticipate, although Brahms chose not to use compound meter (as might be expected from a *scherzo*), but he also kept the balance skewed by emphasizing off-beats as much as downbeats.

The *staccato* theme one, played first in the piano, occurs on the downbeat in a relatively clear manner. To accompany this, Brahms used multiple off-beat chords played in groups in the violin, with weak cadences occurring on downbeats. In performance this serves to keep the meter quite vague for most of the movement, until just before the onset of the development section, when accented half-notes give clear indication of which beat is on. After a fair amount of true *scherzo* energy, bars 55-95, the mood begins to shift back towards the earlier nervous, unsure F# minor. Before the first section is allowed to repeat (at bar 119), a moment of decidedly *con sentimento* playing is called for in the transition out of the development section back to the main

theme. Again, Brahms changed the whole character of the movement for just a brief moment. The *meno presto* violin semi-scales that end exactly where they begin, combined with the piano *rit.*, coupled with the necessary half-step up resolution required (from f back to f#) manage to disrupt the *scherzando* sufficiently to unsettle the listener.

F# minor may not be closely related to D minor, but it does serve as one of the few keys explored in the sonata. It occurs just briefly in the first movement, becomes a much more reasonable choice of alternate tonality after the overwhelming use of A and D major in the *Adagio*, but ultimately is left behind during the decidedly D minor *Presto agitato* finale. If the third movement was not included in this sonata (as one might expect due to the normal structure of 19th century sonatas), the work as a whole would fall apart due to *presto's* flamboyant opening. The powerful, moving second movement could never flow directly into the highly dramatic finale. The third movement's odd character is exactly what is needed to prepare the audience for what is to come, not to mention ease them away from what just was in the *Adagio*.

The final movement of the Sonata no. 3 is the most difficult and energetic of the work. Violin and piano both are called upon for acrobatic as well as loud playing. A driving compound meter keeps the *presto* constantly pushing forward, and the *agitato* tempo marking gives a lot of insight into how Brahms wanted both soft and loud passages to come across. Frustration seems to be the key feeling in each of the double-stop outbursts surrounding the main theme of the 4th movement, but soon after, this energy dissipates into a more quietly sinister or pleading tone. Brahms managed to call forth a bevy of characters with the few themes and key areas used, but all of them are certainly in conflict. The opportunity for some truly dramatic shifts in dynamic arise

in this movement, but due to the difficulty and pace it is not always possible to create as many different, suddenly interchangeable levels as the composer might have intended.

Three main subjects make up the finale, which is another sonata-form movement. This is the third movement of the sonata in which Brahms made use of some type of ternary form. The harmony of the *presto* follows a predictable path through the dominant (in minor) during the development section, before which a strong D minor exposition and relative major second subject craftily lead to A minor through C. Also included in the development is a brief quote from the first movement, in bar 134, which becomes part of a larger re-transition section back to the recap. At the culmination of this long harmonic progression (which ultimately lands on F minor), Brahms uses the only *fortissimo* of the whole sonata. This sets both instruments off on a long series of fast, sometimes syncopated passages that serve as the return of the first subject. Brahms decided not to reuse the opening double-stop motive that would have made the recap's inception much more obvious, but once the music calms again previous themes are more recognizable. After the recap's statement of all three subjects, as *coda* Brahms brought back the motive from the opening few bars of the *presto*, after about 160 bars from their previous statement (bar 128). Since he managed to start the recap without using double-stops, now at the end of the piece they are well placed to set a striking tone for the final cadential section.

The characters of this finale are familiar to listeners from other parts of the sonata. Themes and melodies are not brought back verbatim, but Brahms does find new ways to express the thoughts previously addressed in a sort of last movement summation. During the *coda* Brahms marks *agitato* during a section when the marking

is hardly needed, but this extra instruction sheds light into just how much frenetic energy Brahms wanted here at the end of his final violin work. One last pleading cry, a retrograde of the first movement's opening, slows the tempo one final time before piano and violin in turn hammer out their last seven measures of D minor chords to end the sonata. The specific poem or dramatic scene Brahms portrayed with this work is his alone to know, but the emotions and struggles contained within it are written so evocatively and passionately that any listener with an ear for it will come away from the work with their own correct understanding of its story.

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