

“Narrative Ambiguity in Brahms Op. 38: An Argument for Multi-Movement Analysis”

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Numerous authors such as Cone (1974), Hatten (2004), and Almén (2008), have devised methods of analyzing narrative in absolute music. However, they do not clarify how one should proceed if a narrative is ambiguous. The first movement of Brahms’ E Minor Cello Sonata Op. 38 represents one such ambiguous narrative. As a result of the major-mode coda, it could be read as tragic or comedic depending on the emphasis given to different motivic aspects. Using literature on musical narrative from the previously mentioned authors, I will show how the ambiguous ending of the first movement of Brahms Op. 38 is part of a single, multi-movement narrative in which persistent tragic signifiers, metric dissonance, and formal degradation will confirm an overall tragic archetype.