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

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Narrative Theory

Cone 1974: Musical agency and characterization

Hatten 2004: Markedness and expressive genres

Almén 2008: Transgression vs order and literary archetypes
Establishing Characters

Character #1: Cello acting as permanent unitary agent

Character #2: Piano acting as permanent unitary agent

Two characters in dialogue throughout the work
Tragic Signifiers in Mvt. I

Prominent *pianto* motif opens work and reoccurs throughout

*Pianto* motif signifies tragedy or grief (Monelle 2000, 17)

*Pianto* motif returns chromatically in major key areas, adds markedness
Tragic Signifiers in Mvt. I (Cont.)

Expository and recapitulatory ST keys of VI and bII signify tragedy

Metric dissonance in CT

Displacement dissonance is more striking than grouping

(Krebs 2003, 35)
Narrative Implications

Two characters in a combative relationship

Combativeness established by tragic signifiers and metric dissonance

Establishes Almén’s tragic archetype: defeat of transgression by order

• Order = the negative relationship
• transgression = attempts to reconcile
Ambiguity in the Coda

Coda modulates to parallel major

Suggests a shift to comedic archetype

• Victory of transgression

Subverted by *pian*o motifs
Multi-Movement Analysis

Opus-level analysis can resolve the ambiguity

Done by Hatten (2004) and Kinderman (1992)

Will the piece end tragic or comedic? Remain ambiguous?
2nd Movement

Contains prominent *pianto* motifs

Contains irregular hypermeter (McClelland 2010)

Prolongs ambiguity
3rd Movement

Contains prominent *pianto* motifs

Returns to key of E minor

Connects to 1st Movement
3\textsuperscript{rd} Movement (Cont.)

Significant formal degradation

• Off-tonic recap
• Offset thematic and harmonic recap
• Omission of ST and CT
• No ESC

Also contains pervasive metric dissonance, compound grouping displacement, most striking kind (Krebs 2003, 59)
3rd Movement Metric Dissonance (cont)
Conclusion

Reoccurring tragic signifiers (pianto, key area, metric dissonance) connect all three movements

Final movement ends unambiguously tragic (formal degradation, pianto, metric dissonance, key area)

Resolves ambivalence of first movement and confirms tragic narrative for the entire opus
Bibliography


