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

JOSEPH GRUNKEMEYER

#### 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 <u>ST keys of VI and bII signify tragedy</u>

Metric dissonance in CT

Displacement dissonance is more striking than grouping (Krebs 2003, 35)



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#### 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



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### Ambiguity in the Coda

Coda modulates to parallel major

Suggests a shift to comedic archetype

•Victory of transgression

Subverted by *pianto* 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?

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement

Contains prominent *pianto* motifs

Contains irregular hypermeter (McClelland 2010)

Prolongs ambiguity

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Movement

#### Contains prominent *pianto* motifs



Returns to key of E minor

Connects to 1<sup>st</sup> Movement

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> 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)



#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Movement Metric Dissonance (cont)



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#### 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

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