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Concerning Romantic Pianos

Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works

Camilla Cai

We can gain fresh insight into Brahms performance by studying his keyboard works in relation to the pianos contemporary with and relevant to him.¹ Such an undertaking can reveal a different expectation of sound and way of understanding this music than what we have become accustomed to. Listening to pianos built during the second half of the 19th century provides an impression of a sound ideal clearly different from the one now accepted in the twentieth century. Brahms knew

1. My information concerning 19th-century pianos derives from a study of the pianos at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (I thank Gerhard Stradner for his generous help), and from the collection of Edmund Michael Frederick and Patricia Frederick in Ashburnham, Massachusetts (to the Fredericks I extend my heartfelt appreciation for giving of their time and knowledge). For further details concerning late 19th-century pianos see Edwin M. Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982). Rosamond E. M. Harding in *The Piano-Forte: Its History Traced to the Great Exhibition of 1851* (Cambridge: University Press, 1933) considers the piano only to about 1850. Concerning Brahms's pianos specifically see Stephen Brady and George S. Bozarth, "Brahms's Pianos," *American Brahms Society Newsletter* 6,2 (Fall, 1988). Two studies in progress might be mentioned: Robert Winter's book on 19th-century pianos, *The Romantic Piano: Its Makers and Its Music* (reported in *Nineteenth-Century Music* 9, 1985, p. 80), and Stephen Brady's study of pianos relevant to Brahms (University of Washington thesis). I am indebted to Mr. Brady for his helpful comments in regard to my own studies.

German and Austrian pianos better than American, French, or English ones.² His frequent travelling in middle Europe, especially as a younger man, acquainted him at first with a limited spectrum of instruments.³ For example, he used a local make from Hamburg, a Baumgarden & Heins, as a student and in his early concertizing.⁴ Later, on his tours he played Viennese makes; in Graz he used a Streicher (Nov. 11, 1867), and then three days later in the same hall, a Bösendorfer (Nov. 14, 1867), and in Budapest another Bösendorfer (Nov. 9, 1881). In Bonn he used German pianos, a Steinweg Nachfolgern (Jan. 22, 1880) and later a Blüthner (Jan. 18, 1883). He played a Bechstein, the popular German piano from Berlin, in Würzburg (Dec. 6, 1872), Cologne (Dec. 9, 1872), and Amsterdam (Jan. 31, 1881). Occasionally he encountered pianos from the United States: a Steinway in Neustadt (Feb. 19, 1876) and Hannover (Feb. 3, 1883) and a Knabe (from Baltimore) in Breslau (March 23, 1876).

Although Brahms's ideal of piano sound probably developed from his acquaintance with the whole range of pianos in the German-Austrian sphere, he had strong leanings to the more conservative pianos, the Streichers and Bösendorfers.⁵ Already in 1864 Brahms had told Clara Schumann of his fondness for the Streicher. "I have a beautiful grand from Streicher . . . He [Streicher] wanted to share [his] new achievements with me . . ."⁶ He performed often at the J.B. Streicher Salon, and in other concerts he regularly chose Streichers as late as the spring of 1869. Around that time Bösendorfer began to take control of the piano market in Vienna, and November 29, 1874 seems to mark Brahms's last solo public performance on a Streicher. Brahms had performed on Bösendorfers from his earliest days in Vienna (1863), but only after 1880 did he shift his public allegiance to them.

While Viennese concert programs do not record that he played public concerts on other Viennese pianos, Brahms knew the Ehrbar well from

2. Brahms did, of course, play the French Erard and English Broadwood at Clara's house. See Florence May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms*, 2 vols. (London, 1905), vol. 1, 197-98.

3. Specific information concerning Brahms's public concerts derives from my study of concert programs at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna.

4. Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 2nd-4th ed., 4 vols. (Berlin, 1912-21; Tutzing, 1976), vol. 1, 35, 196, 255.

5. Kalbeck, *Brahms*, vol. 3, 493. Edmund M. Frederick in a personal communication, May 1986, points out that some German manufacturers adopted innovations, but they also built conservative pianos until the end of the century.

6. "Ich habe einen schönen Flügel von Streicher. Er hat mir eben neue Errungenschaften dadurch mittheilen wollen . . ." Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann, ein Künstlerleben: nach Tagebüchern und Briefen*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1902, 1905, 1908), vol. 3, 167-68.

many rehearsals and private recitals at the Ehrbar Salon, and he must have thought highly of the Schweighofer because he appeared at the centennial celebration honoring that firm in 1892, not the kind of official event he otherwise attended willingly.⁷

His private allegiance remained with the Streicher; when an 1868 Streicher grand, no. 6713, was given to him by the company in 1873 it must have been an especially welcome gift because it stayed with him at his home in Vienna until the end of his life.⁸ This Streicher, now lost, could have given a very good idea of the conservative piano still appreciated by Brahms in his old age. Instead, its surviving relative from 1870, no. 7011 at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, will have to stand in for a description of its type.⁹ This piano, built only two years later, was probably quite similar to Brahms's, and although it is not in particularly good repair, elements of its original character still exist, for example the light touch and delicate sound. In all ranges its sound is quiet but well-defined. The three main ranges — bass, middle, and treble — have distinct timbres, and, as the volume increases, those timbres change quite significantly. These features contrast markedly with the prized evenness of timbre on a modern piano. The Streicher's frame, consisting of only two cast-iron tension bars bolted to the metal string plate, supports the straight-strung mechanism and the sound board. This fairly weak, incomplete metal frame requires stringing the piano to a slightly lower tension than that possible on the full, single-piece, metal frame available on technologically more advanced pianos. The Streicher's resulting "woodwind" sound lacks the brilliance, the slightly metallic tinge and the volume of sound found in pianos with a one-piece metal frame. The straight-strung feature means that the Streicher has shorter, thicker bass strings than a comparably-sized cross-strung piano. Probably because of this shorter length and greater thickness, these strings have few upper partials. The resulting bass sound is of special clarity, openness, and lightness.¹⁰

7. Kalbeck, *Brahms*, vol. 3, 178, 298, 451, 455, 457. Otto Biba, *Johannes Brahms in Wien* (Vienna, 1983), 68-69, item 227; an exhibition catalogue.

8. Kalbeck, *Brahms*, vol. 2, 409.

9. The Kunsthistorisches Museum's *Katalog der Sammlung alter Musikinstrumente*, part I, *Saitenklaviere* (Vienna, 1966; reprint 1978), pp. 55-56, indicates that these two pianos were of very similar construction. Edmund M. Frederick (in a personal communication, May 1986) adds that Streicher did redesign some of its parallel-strung pianos after 1868 to enlarge the soundboard and strengthen the ribbing.

10. Good, *Giraffes*, 13, 178; Edmund M. Frederick, "The Big Bang," *The Piano Quarterly*, CXXVI (Summer, 1984), 33. Cross-stringing, which permits longer, thinner, more flexible strings, provides additional mixing of partials for further richness of timbre. Direct comparison with other pianos is problematic because of additional variables: as the frame construction increases in size and gains strength, so do the possibilities for increased length and thickness of string.

The Streicher's Viennese action with its soft, leather-covered hammers differs in weight, but not design, from the actions Nanette Streicher made in the 1810s and 20s.¹¹ This design, completely different from the double-escapement repetition actions of English pianos, produces an especially crisp attack of sound followed by an immediate, very rapid decay. Because the action is lighter weight than a modern repetition action, the key feels very responsive. For a pianissimo effect the stroke may seem to require extra pressure, but any increase in dynamics needs only the most minute adjustment of pressure. In addition, the shallow key depth needs only short finger strokes. Overall, the piano seems to require that the fingers move with small, quick, and delicate motions. Two other Streichers in good repair, now in Edmund M. Frederick's collection — an 1868 straight-strung made only months before Brahms's piano and an 1875 cross-strung — confirm the light, clear sound and the delicate touch necessary to play them.¹²

It is such pianos that Brahms knew, and in a rare moment of openness he speaks unambiguously about his compositional process for them. He indicates that he intimately understood the possibilities of the instrument and could confidently translate that knowledge to the written page. In his struggle to write the violin part of the *Double Concerto*, op. 102, he complains to Clara:

It is quite a different matter to write for instruments whose characteristics and sound one only incidentally has in one's head and which one can only hear mentally — than to write for an instrument which one knows through and through, as I know the piano. There I always know exactly what I write and why I write one way or another.¹³

11. Good, *Giraffes*, 201. Both Ehrbar and Bösendorfer — pianos Brahms performed on regularly — continued to use the Viennese action well into the last quarter of the century. See also Good, 144 and *Katalog* (Kunsthistorisches Museum), 56-59.

12. The 1868 straight-strung piano, number 6668, was probably made only a few months before Brahms's own.

13. "Es ist doch etwas anderes für Instrumente schreiben, deren Art und Klang man nur so beiläufig im Kopf hat, die man nur im Geist hört — oder für ein Instrument schreiben, das man durch und durch kennt; — Wie ich das Clavier, wo ich durchaus weiss, was ich schreibe und warum ich so oder so schreibe." August, 1887. Litzmann, *Clara Schumann, ein Künstlerleben*, vol. 3, 493-94, or with slight differences, Kalbeck, *Brahms*, vol. 4, 68.

Brahms's *51 Exercises* for the pianist show how clearly he understood pianistic problems.¹⁴ These exercises probably derive from Brahms's own pianistic capabilities and were undoubtedly written to fit the pianos of his time. Brahms obviously understood their difficulty for others because he suggested, facetiously we assume, that his publisher Simrock provide a cover design of torture instruments — especially thumb screws and the iron maiden — colored in blood red and flaming yellow.¹⁵ Through a variety of finger-wrenching drills to be played in all keys they prepare the pianist to balance the sounds within one hand, to produce equal fingers, to control the thumb (particularly on the black keys), to use the left hand equally with the right, and especially to control finger motion while the hand stays in a spread-out position. In all, these exercises cover problems of touch, articulation, phrasing, balance, and hand coordination that occur frequently in Brahms's piano music. Because these exercises were gathered and published in the same year as ops. 118 and 119 (1893), they may have been on Brahms's mind as he worked on these particular piano pieces.

The textures Brahms chooses for the late piano pieces (ops. 116, 117, 118 and 119) reveal his clarity of intent to produce a defined, balanced piano sound. The importance of this textural balance reveals itself in many ways, for example, in Brahms's frequent tenor melodies, in his distinctive handling of the bass range, and in the use of symbols and words that indicate, among other things, touch and articulation. All of these elements can be shown to have been influenced by the properties of the nineteenth-century piano and need to be understood in respect to its capabilities.

Dame Ethel Smyth writes illuminatingly of Brahms's own playing style for tenor melodies: "lifting a submerged theme out of a tangle of music he used jokingly to ask us to admire the gentle sonority of his 'tenor thumb'."¹⁶ These characteristic tenor or cello melodies have been colloquially dubbed by some pianists as "thumb melodies." Such melodies generally circle around middle c or fall within the c' to c'' octave. They often lie between the pianist's two hands and as such require special pianistic control to balance and bring out the melody notes properly.

14. Johannes Brahms, *Complete Transcriptions, Cadenzas and Exercises for Solo Piano*, edited by Eusebius Mandyczewski (Leipzig, 1927; New York, 1971); *Collected Works*, vol. 15, 126-78.

15. Johannes Brahms, *Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 1919; Tutzing, 1974), vol. 12, 107.

16. Ethyl Smyth, *Impressions That Remained: Memoirs*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1919), vol. 1, 266.

Many selections in Brahms's *51 Exercises*, and in certain unpublished exercises as well, prepare a pianist for these melodies by aiming at thumb versatility.¹⁷

Ex. 1. Brahms, *Miscellaneous Fragments*, folio 2(r) New York Public Library

The thumb learns to make small, precise, quick motions, yet balances its sound against notes played simultaneously by other fingers within the hand. Such a sure, versatile, well-controlled thumb assumes a particularly important role for smoothly playing a middle-range melody as it crosses from one hand to the other.

The tenor range melody in the middle of the texture in Ex. 2 (the B section of op. 116, no. 7) demonstrates particularly the importance of the thumb.¹⁸

17. I wish to thank the New York Public Library for permitting this transcription from the autograph in their possession.

18. This and the remaining examples are taken from Johannes Brahms, *Complete Shorter Works for Solo Piano*, edited by Eusebius Mandyczewski (Leipzig, 1927; New York, 1971); *Collected Works*, vol. 14.

Ex. 2. Tenor Melody in Op. 116, no. 7, mm. 21-36.

21 C *p* 4 2 1 4

[1] [1] [1] [1]

24

[1] [1] [1] [1]

27 D *sempre ben legato*

[1] [1] [1] [1]

2 1 5

30 *sostenuto sempre* *cresc.*

4 5 4 2 1 5 4 5

33

35 *f* [1]

In mm. 21-28 the thumbs play pitches that serve both as melody notes and as endings for textural arpeggios (the fingerings suggested by me are placed in brackets). Brahms encourages this particular fingering by writing-in rare fingering numbers (the unbracketed numbers); the two thumbs in succession must balance and connect with each other particularly well. The melody moves out of the tenor range in m. 29, but thumb balance remains critical because the widely spaced arpeggios still give the melody an interior, surrounded, and covered quality. In particular, the melodic leap from b' down to the e' for the left-hand thumb in m. 29 needs special care because the listener expects $c''-b'-a'$ on the basis of the melody of m. 21. The sudden tenor-range return in m. 36, $d'-c'-b$, after the dramatic highpoint of m. 35 again requires a clear left-hand thumb entrance to bring back the tenor-range color and prepare for the return of the C section (m. 37 begins like m. 21).

The problem of delineating such middle-range melodies lies not just with the pianist. However smoothly he plays them, however prominently he brings them out, if he works on a modern piano, the technical approach to bringing out the sound and the final balance of sound will probably remain significantly different from Brahms's own. The modern pianist will, most likely, work harder than Brahms and achieve less clarity of sound. On the pianos of Brahms's time the three main registers, bass, middle, and treble, show clear differences of sound quality and timbre. The distinctive middle range — particularly around and below middle C — sounds full, mellow, and prominent, and it easily dominates the treble and bass ranges. (On a modern piano this mid-range tends to be fuzzy and bland, covered by a rich, thick bass and a brilliantly-edged treble.) A Brahms melody, then, placed in the middle range of a piano of his own era, would stand out with no special effort and would require only the understanding of where the melody line lay to coax out a warm, melodic tone for it; the nature of the instrument's sound supports the melody. Brahms undoubtedly heard this middle area as the richest on the piano, and therefore chose to exploit it in his piano pieces.

One of the most common complaints about Brahms's music and one directly related to the difficulty of bringing out tenor melodies concerns the thickness or "muddiness" of Brahms's bass parts, the number and kind of notes he writes in the low range. However, the sound of the conservative German or Austrian piano from the second half of the nineteenth century supports the conclusion that this particular concern may not have existed for Brahms. The clear, light sound of the low strings resembles the timbre of a piano from the 1820s more than that of a modern instrument. Few interfering overtones muddle the tone

quality, and the bass notes, while initially forceful, have a very fast decay rate. As a result, the strings produce a purer, softer sound than do those of the modern piano. Because a tone fades quickly, its sound does not run into the next tone, and the notes can be heard individually. This openness of the low pitches creates an illusion of sustained, connected sound because the listener clearly identifies which pitches have been played. As a result, harmonic implications, melodic imitations and other effects that Brahms placed in low ranges can stand out in sharp relief. An understanding of this distinctive 19th-century bass timbre might change the common perception that Brahms's pieces inherently require a struggle on the part of the pianist in order to balance the texture.

These low sonorities figure prominently in Brahms's compositions for piano: he particularly favored the low-positioning of a third in a chord.

Ex. 3. Texture

a. Op. 118, no. 5, m.5

b. Op. 119, no. 4, mm.16-18

c. Op. 119, no. 3, m.25

Musical score for Op. 119, no. 3, m.25. The score is written for piano in G major. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The melody in the treble staff starts on G4, moves to A4, B4, C5, and then D5. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, and F3.

d. Op. 118, no. 6, mm.7-8

Musical score for Op. 118, no. 6, mm.7-8 (first system). The score is written for piano in B-flat major. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a measure number '7' above the staff. The melody in the treble staff starts on B-flat4, moves to C5, and then D5. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with notes B-flat2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, and A3.

Musical score for Op. 118, no. 6, mm.7-8 (second system). The score is written for piano in B-flat major. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a measure number '8' above the staff. The melody in the treble staff starts on B-flat4, moves to C5, and then D5. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with notes B-flat2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, and A3. A piano (*p*) dynamic marking is present in the treble staff.

These textural placements may involve block chords with thirds in the low range, as in Ex. 3a (op. 118, no. 5, m. 5, beats 2 and 5). At other times Brahms selects four-note chords in close position in low range that duplicate chords in the right hand, as in Ex. 3b (op. 119, no. 4, mm. 16-18). And he also writes low-lying octave doublings of melodies that darken the overall texture, as in Ex. 3c (op. 119, no. 3, m. 25). Finally, quick harmonic or melodic motion may occur in the low range; in Ex. 3d the descending bass line (op. 118, no. 6, mm. 7-8) produces a motion that is conventionally characterized as "thick and difficult to hear." All these instances seem more transparent, more audible, and more balanced on Brahms-period pianos than on modern ones. The low-lying pitches seem intended, not to convey an undifferentiated romantic wash of sound, not to give the impression of thick filler notes, but rather to stand out as unusual, interesting, and well-balanced parts of the texture.

Also intimately tied up with the nature of the conservative late nineteenth-century piano are issues of touch and articulation.¹⁹ Since that piano's keystroke is short, the action light and responsive, and its bass clean and distinct, the possibility for a great variety of sounds emerges. Brahms demonstrates his sensitivity to these possibilities for nuance by including in almost every passage of the late piano pieces symbols or words to clarify his intentions. His language to indicate various styles of playing includes three indicators of touch, *legato*, *leggiero*, and *marcato*, and two kinds of articulation, slur marks and staccatos.

Distinct patterns reveal what Brahms probably means by these terms and symbols, and the patterns in turn disclose more about performance practices than the signs alone can reveal. For example, because these words occur in only a limited number of places, their positioning alone suggests that they refer to special or unusual conditions. They are often combined with a distinctive articulation that seems to further enhance a particular touch.

Brahms's *51 Exercises* can act as studies for these categories of touch and provide excellent preparation for similarly marked passages within his pieces. In the exercises he seems to distinguish five styles of playing, including the three mentioned above. A few labeled *ben marcato* and containing many staccato dots suggest the most emphatically detached style. The exercise labeled *staccato* and also containing written-in staccato dots, suggests a less sharply-defined style of detached notes.

19. Experiments of touch and articulation were made in March, 1986 on an 1868 Streicher, no. 6668, and an 1875 Streicher, in the Edmund M. Frederick Collection.

Passages marked *legato* or *ben legato*, are designed to teach the fingers to make this smoothest of sounds. Brahms distinguishes between this extremely smooth touch and an especially light touch labeled *leggiero*. The *leggiero* exercises also sometimes contain slurs. This lightest of all touches also appears as an alternate marking: an exercise may be labeled *ben legato* (*o leggiero*) to indicate the two possible ways of practicing it. Brahms also asks for combinations of touch by indicating that one hand play *legato* with slurs while the other plays similar notes *leggiero* without slurs. In some exercises the two touches are required simultaneously within one hand. The final and largest category within the exercises include studies that notably lack any verbal indications, though some of these include slurs and staccato marks. This group of exercises apparently teaches finger patterns and proper articulation, but not within a specialized touch, and seem, therefore, to contrast with those containing the extra verbal indications (*ben marcato*, *staccato*, *legato*, *leggiero*). A moderately detached playing style should probably distinguish them, but one seeks in vain for helpful comments from Brahms on this extremely important matter.

Brahms's late piano pieces follow remarkably similar patterns of usage for these touch indicators and marks of articulation. The majority of the music, as with the exercises, lacks words to indicate a distinctive overall touch but has copious and carefully marked slurs and staccatos. If these sections were played in a moderately detached style, then sections singled out with the word *legato* could provide a real contrast of touch and sound. Probably to encourage such an extra smooth interpretation of *legato* sections, Brahms sometimes places particularly large groups of notes under one slur mark. In op. 116, no. 4, m. 44 (Ex. 4a) Brahms additionally stresses the smoothness of *ben legato* by coupling it with *col Ped.*. *Legato*, then seems to mean extra finger connection, sometimes with additional pedal, for further smoothing of sound. *Leggiero*, the contrasting, extremely light and detached touch appears well demonstrated in the A section of op. 119, no. 3 (Ex. 4b); this piece needs almost no staccatos or slurs to further intensify its delicate style. Finally, the strongly detached touch expected from a *marcato* indication applies to sections in various dynamic ranges; in Ex. 4c (op. 119, no. 4, mm. 153-67) the term seems to encourage a special forcefulness of finger stroke to the *pianissimo* (*pp*) return of the A section, a masterful example of emphatic understatement.

Ex. 4. Touch

a. Op. 116, no. 4, mm.44-47

44 *ben legato*
col Ped.

47 *dim.*

b. Op. 119, no. 3, mm.1-5

1 *Grazioso e giocoso*
molto p e leggero

5

c. Op. 119, no. 4, mm.153-55

pp *ma ben marc.*

All these markings of touch and articulation must be considered in relation to the pianos Brahms knew. Because these pianos have a much lighter action than the modern piano — keys go down more easily, and the stroke is significantly shallower — the keyboard feels markedly different. It requires only a small, light, or quick finger action for even the most vigorous of these articulation effects; such a keyboard easily permits Brahms's wide range of touch strokes and produces realistic, audible contrasts among them.

Brahms did not use his expression signs casually. His careful, relevant markings and his many corrections to them during the editorial process attest to this. Though various placements may now reflect transmission errors — some by Brahms, some by his copyist, yet others by his engraver — the marks still provide vital information for the interpretation of the piano pieces.

With a more accurate understanding of Brahms's terminology, coupled with an awareness of Brahms's special piano textures, the performer could produce a performance relevant to Brahms's own style even lacking a nineteenth-century piano. Best of all, however, the performer might try these pieces on a properly restored, conservative, late nineteenth-century piano. Such an experience would allow the pianist to experience momentarily the world of sound as Brahms knew it and to reexamine these miniatures in a context close to their original one. The knowledge gained, if sensitively and thoughtfully applied, might bring forward lost aspects of the music and thus enrich our understanding of Brahms's last piano pieces.