

Brahms' Fourth Symphony: A masterpiece of motivic thorough-composition

by Hartmut Cramer

Brahms' Fourth Symphony, which shows such a high degree of inner mental "logical" rigor, formal completeness, and creative freedom—in short, perfection—is one of the best examples of *motivic thorough-composition*, and it demonstrates, that as late as the end of last century, musical work in the "old forms"—which by then were widely slandered—was still being mastered.

Brahms' accomplishments in this field were, by the way, also—albeit enviously—acknowledged by his foes. Even from his "neo-German" antagonist Richard Wagner, who, during their only personal encounter (in Vienna, in February 1864), after Brahms had delivered a convincing proof of his art with the performance of his *Variations on a Theme by Handel*, was so astonished, that he declared: "One sees what can be accomplished in the old forms, if there is someone who knows how to use them."¹ But that didn't pull Wagner—let alone his many followers—back from continuing their practice, of loudly crying out against Brahms, as well as infamously conspiring against him behind his back.

Although Brahms' Fourth Symphony was initially met with a lot of non-understanding by the "great mass" of his contemporaries, and even by his Vienna circle of friends, his closest artistic companions, such as Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim—and Brahms himself, naturally—knew very well, what a masterpiece he had created. "My heart is full of overflowing over your symphony," wrote Clara Schumann to Brahms from Frankfurt on Dec. 15, 1885, after she had initially studied the piano edition. "It created a beautiful hour for me, captivating me through its richness in colour and its beauty otherwise. I almost don't know, which movement I should prefer: the first, dreaming one, with its marvellous development

part and the wonderful points of rest, and its soft waving inner movement flowing with it . . . or the last one, grandiosely constructed, with its enormous manifoldness, and despite its such great work so full of passion . . . which lies already in its main motif (one could not really call it a theme). . . . I wish I could personally speak with you about it, with the score before us!"²

With the violinist Joseph Joachim, his closest friend since the beginning of the 1850s, who in the meantime had become the director of the music conservatory in Berlin, Brahms corresponded concerning this, as also in all other cases, in detail about many technical musical questions, especially concerning the strings. Joachim thus already knew parts of the symphony before it was published. Directly after the dress-rehearsal, and just before he was about to perform the Berlin debut of Brahms' Fourth at an academy concert on Feb. 1, 1886, Joachim wrote to his "highly esteemed master": "If I didn't express my, in fact, extreme enthusiasm about your newest symphony immediately after the first rehearsal, it is solely due to the gigantic work load of the past few days. . . . We now have played through your magnificent creation in our dress rehearsal today, and I may hope, that tonight it can be performed with certainty and passion. It really sank ever deeper down into my soul and that of the orchestra. The gripping character of the whole, the density of invention, the wonderfully intertwined growth of the motifs, even more than the richness and the beauty of single parts, I like very much, so that I almost believe, the E minor is my favorite among the four symphonies. . . . It is not so easy, though, to *beautifully* play the variation of the theme divided among the two violins; but if one wants to change it, and believes to have accomplished it in one bar, the very next bar then creates a problem—you really

invent in such a logical way, everything is so fully in place, that one ought not touch it in the least. The *pizzicati* are shown to full advantage everywhere."³

The judgment of these two great artists and friends is no surprise, however; especially, as both—even if only indirectly and without knowing it—had a certain "part" in developing the *concept* of this magnificent symphony, in which Brahms unmistakably demonstrated, what enormous, freedom-creating potential is contained in the method of motivic thorough-composition, which he took over from his Classical forebears in whose tradition he consciously placed himself.

As in all great Classical works, the key to understanding lies in the *entire process of development* of the piece, so, too, for this symphony; i.e., the process of musical development expressed therein is best approached "backwards." One starts with the last movement: that part of the whole, which was constantly going through the head of the composer as the "final goal." As is well known, Brahms—like Beethoven—meticulously changed and fine-tuned every detail of a composition when near completion for quite some time; but he also—like Mozart and practically all other great composers—had already worked out the whole composition *conceptually* in his head before writing it down.

The Finale of the Fourth Symphony, which has no instructions other than the tempo marking "*Allegro energico e passionato*," is the best proof of this. Brahms had written down the first and second movements during his summer "vacation" of 1884 in Mürzzuschlag (at Semmering); the other two—as Brahms explicitly noted in his 1885 calendar, first the Finale, and then the Scherzo—were written in the summer the year after, also in Mürzzuschlag. Brahms, who

never released a musical piece unfinished, and who always insisted with his pupils (and himself) that it should be considered as a complete whole in content and form, steadily rejected all the requests of his friends, that he present them with some “juicy appetizers” during the process of creation—and sometimes brutally so (“I just put together a polka and waltz party,” or, “Just a few *entre’actes* . . . what together usually is called a symphony”). The only thing that his friends could get out of him during this time, as far as the “content” of his great composition was concerned, was the poetical comparison with the “climate” in Mürzzuschlag: “The cherries here are not going to get sweet; you wouldn’t eat them!” he wrote during the summer months of 1885 to the conductor Hans von Bülow, with whose orchestra in Meiningen he would be rehearsing and performing this symphony later that year. So, Brahms knew perfectly well the kind of mental work he was about to impose on his contemporaries.

His preliminary studies of the last movement, however, go back more than 10 years. Even though people were trying to figure out the form of the last movement for quite some time after the very first performance, Brahms himself, as usual, didn’t comment publicly on his works; besides, he believed what he wrote to Hans von Bülow after the “mishap” of the first performance of this symphony at the end of September 1885 in Vienna (Brahms and the pianist Ignaz Brüll performed it on two pianos among a few close friends): “I am not really interested in a premiere. More in a performance after 10 or 20 years—which for an artist the likes of us means immortality”—it is obvious that this final movement is clearly a *chaconne*, or a *passacaglia*. Joachim recognized this at once—no wonder, being a violinist who masterfully performed the famous *Chaconne* from J.S. Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D minor for unaccompanied violin. (In order to make the audience of his above-mentioned academy concert aware that he had concluded this symphony in an unusual and very special form, Brahms added an asterisk to the “*Allegro energico e passionato*,” and the words “Variations on the theme:” followed by the theme as shown in **Figure 8.1**.

FIGURE 8.1
Fourth movement theme of
Brahms’ Symphony No. 4



FIGURE 8.2
Opening of the ‘Chaconne’ from J.S. Bach’s Partita No. 2 for
Unaccompanied Violin in D minor



FIGURE 8.3
Opening of fourth movement of Brahms’ Symphony No. 4



FIGURE 8.4

Strings take up theme in fourth movement of Brahms' Fourth

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 9-16) shows the string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass) playing a pizzicato theme. The second system (measures 17-23) shows the string quartet and the Viola and Violoncello parts playing a *ma marc.* theme. The third system (measures 24-33) shows the Violin I and II parts playing an *arco* theme, with the Viola and Violoncello parts also playing *arco*.

Brahms, who had intensively studied the works of J.S. Bach from his early youth on, and who held Bach's art of composition in exceptionally high esteem, not only knew this extraordinary final movement of Bach's D minor Partita very well through the interpretations of his friend Joachim,⁵ but also, because he had arranged this piece (like most of the other sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin) for study purposes, and for "simply pure pleasure," for piano for *one hand*, as is made clear by a letter from him to Clara Schumann (June 1877):

"To me, [Bach's] Chaconne is one of the most wonderful, unbelievable music pieces. In one system, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of deepest thoughts and most powerful emotions. If I were to imagine that I would have been able to make, to receive this piece, I know for sure, that I would have become mad because of the enormous excitement and shock. If one doesn't have the greatest violinist around, then it is well the most beautiful pleasure, to simply listen to its sound in one's mind.

"But the piece demands that one must work with it in all ways. And one also doesn't want to hear music simply sounding in the air; Joachim is not here so often, and therefore I try this and that. But whatever I take, orchestra or piano—the pleasure is always spoiled.

"In only one way, I find, can I create for myself a much smaller, but approximating, and wholly pure pleasure of this piece—if I play it with the left hand alone! Even the history of the egg of Columbus then comes to my mind! A similar difficulty, the kind of technique, the process of making the *arpeggios*, everything comes together, so that I—feel like a violinist! Try it, I wrote it down only for you."⁶

Working with this piece "in all ways"—that's what Brahms wanted to accomplish almost a decade later by way of composing a symphony, proving with that, the enormous creative potentialities the proper use of this "old," tremendously strict (but also free) form would allow. Naturally, composers had already previously concluded a symphony with a variations movement—the most famous among them being Beethoven with his "Eroica" Symphony No. 3, as Brahms constantly pointed out to his skeptical Viennese friends; but the exact form of a chaconne as the concluding movement—and climax—of a great symphony? This, before Brahms, had never been tried.

By choosing the form of the chaconne, or the passacaglia,⁷ Brahms had defined the—

“old,” and always “new”—problem: How can the basic principle of musical (and human) development—change, variation—be demonstrated by way of a “fixed” musical line? How can creative freedom be unified with lawful necessity? How can such music—and art generally—be “rigorous and free” at the same time?

Conceptually, this movement is fully equivalent to Bach’s Chaconne (Figure 8.2). Bach varies a theme (motif) of four bars, i.e., its supporting bass line; and he does it in such a way, that with practically every new four-bar section, a new variation begins, practically without changing the bass-line harmonically. All in all, Bach is very careful in changing the harmonics during the composition; the first, elaborated part of variations is in D minor, the second in the related D major mode; then comes a part—which is equally strictly composed, i.e., starting every four bars with a new variation—again in D minor, until Bach concludes this immense work with a cadenza. The “trick” which Bach uses to create changes throughout the composition, and even *changes of the changes*, despite the “fixed” theme, or motif, is to vary the other voices, to change the theme itself *rhythmically*, to place it into other registers, and to “disguise” it, or “adapt” it to its environment in such a way, that partly a “logical,” partly a surprising process of development takes place. And, when this can lead to such a magnificent result with *only four voices on a “small” string instrument*, what then can be accomplished with a big orchestra with many voices?

That is exactly what Brahms demonstrated with the final movement of Symphony No. 4 in E minor: With 8 bars, his theme/motif takes exactly twice the number of bars, as does Bach’s Chaconne. The other basic difference: Brahms theme is placed in the soprano (instead of the bass) voice. Otherwise, the formal architecture is the same: The theme is in 3/4 time, and is varied—with only a few exceptions—exactly every eight bars, itself *remaining completely unchanged harmonically*. Naturally, Brahms can let the theme roam through all the voices of the orchestra, a fact which he exploits freely, although he adheres to the Classical tradition, insofar as the four string voices—the orchestra’s inner “core”—bear the main burden of the thematic work. After having first presented the theme with the woodwinds and brass alone (Figure 8.3), beginning in measure 9 (Figure 8.4) the first violins take up the theme (*pizzicato*); in measure 17 the ‘cellos (also *pizzicato*). In measure 25, the first violins take over again, but this time with

FIGURE 8.5

Conclusion of fourth movement of Brahms’ Symphony No. 4

The image shows a musical score for the conclusion of the fourth movement of Brahms' Symphony No. 4, measures 296-304. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system (measures 296-303) includes parts for Tympani, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello/Contrabass. The second system (measures 304) includes parts for Tympani, Violin, Viola, and Violoncello/Contrabass. Dynamics include *ff* and *sf*. A trill is marked in measure 304.

plucked *chords*; and then, in measure 33, the contrabasses (supported by the bassoons) sing the theme (changed rhythmically by way of octaves) strongly with the bow (*arco*), while the middle voices of the string section accompany this (likewise *arco*) with a rhythmically displaced counterpoint, and the first violins (“*ben marcato largamente*”) with a “lyrical” one.

After a rather free variation of the theme by the flute, which is only “supported” by the first French horn and the upper strings, comes—as in Bach’s work—an equally rigorously (and freely) composed series of variations in the related E major mode, in which Brahms takes the liberty to present the theme not only by one group of instruments alone, but lets it roam through all the voices.

In measure 129 (not shown) the *reprise* begins, where the theme is quoted “verbatim” by the brass and woodwinds, but is varied contrapuntally starting with the upbeat to measure 133, played *fortissimo* by the upper strings, and starting with the

downbeat of measure 134, also by the ‘cellos and contrabasses.

During the following part of variations, Brahms exploits the freedom which he has accomplished so far: He varies the variations using the entire orchestra in a rhythmically very free manner, and concludes this movement with a 58-measure-long coda, beginning with measure 253 (not shown).

That is the formal architecture of this last movement, which *conceptually* follows Bach’s Chaconne, but, in its extension—as intended—naturally far exceeds this great example. The way in which Brahms presents this theme *harmonically*, demonstrates above all, that he quite consciously walked in the footsteps of other Classical examples. What is striking about this rather “harmless” E minor motif, is the fact, that in measure 5 (Figure 8.1), Brahms uses an A#, a tone totally alien to this mode. That this is not just meant as a characteristic of this motif, is made clear by the fact that Brahms emphasizes this place with a tympani (kettledrum)

FIGURE 8.6

Opening of first movement of Brahms' Symphony No. 4

Allegro non troppo

development of the E minor motif, creating an “unclear” in the key, even “lifting it off its hinges” (since modulations in all directions become thinkable), and makes clear from the very beginning: *nothing is constant, but change itself!*

The other interval which Brahms uses predominantly at this prominent place, is the third, and its inversion, the sixth. The fact that this is no accident, is demonstrated by the use of *pizzicato* in the strings beginning in measure 9 (Figure 8.4); almost all the chords of the strings contain both complementary intervals. The prominent and characteristic use of these intervals—third, sixth, and Lydian interval (highlighted by the tympani)—shows itself throughout the entire movement, until the very end (Figure 8.5).

This results—apart from the very free, but equally strict usage of the chaconne form—in the stunning completeness of the whole movement. But on this rests the no-less-surprising conceptual unity of the entire symphony. The aforementioned intervallic relationships mark the opening of the symphony (Figure 8.6), dominate the first movement (Figure 8.7), and are equally prominent throughout the second and third movements (which, as already mentioned, according to Brahms’ notebook, he composed, or rather wrote down, as the very last piece of the symphony).

Even more revealing is the fact, that Brahms took the idea of the opening motif, rhythmically and harmonically, from no less a composer than Beethoven, as the following measures (Figure 8.8) from the “*Adagio sostenuto*” of the piano sonata Op. 106 demonstrate. (As is shown in Chapter 7, we find evidence in Beethoven’s sketchbooks, that Beethoven in turn sought the help of J.S. Bach, copying down key passages from *The Art of the Fugue* (see Figure 7.2). And as pointed out in Chapter 3, in Fugue IV of that work (see Figure 3.11), a sequence of descending thirds become a crucial characteristic of the musical development.) Brahms studied these examples of his forerunners intensively.

Returning to Figure 8.8: In this passage, Beethoven makes extremely dense key changes (in the course of only 12 measures, he explicitly points to a change in key *three times*), with the climax without any doubt reached in measures 78-84, which are nominally in C minor/C major, but which are, in fact, from measure 80 onward, in a keyless mode, a harmonic “no man’s land,” where Beethoven intensifies the density of key changes to the extreme, so that no mode

FIGURE 8.7

Second motivic element in first movement of Brahms' Fourth

(Figure 8.3); and he does this, not only when presenting this motif, but again and again during the whole movement. This interval of E-A#, which is heard clearly by way of this suddenly introduced roll of the kettledrum (with the e being additionally strengthened

by the trumpets and the two first French horns, while the a# is played by the upper winds (two flutes, one oboe, and one clarinet), as well as also the fourth French horn and the first trombone, is nothing but the “Lydian interval.” It interrupts the line of

dominates at all.

Exactly this kind of ambiguity is what Brahms creates at the very beginning of the first movement, by his extensive use of D \sharp —a tone extraneous to the natural E minor scale—and the Lydian interval a-d \sharp created thereby, which surfaces in the violas' echoing of the entrance-motif (and three times, at that), as well as in both the first and second violins, playing in octaves, between their a'-a'' in measure 2, and their d \sharp -d \sharp ' in measure 3 (Figure 8.9).

It is quite obvious, that Brahms developed the second theme (motif) of this movement, which is presented by the winds *in unison* (Figure 8.7), out of the material of the opening motif; repeatedly he uses (besides the already known pair of third/sixth intervals), the Lydian interval to the (E minor) basic note, the A \sharp , which in turn plays such a prominent role in the motif of the final movement. Thus, Brahms maintains the practice, which Norbert Brainin has indicated in all his discussions of the compositional method of motivic thorough-composition, by writing "monothematically"; i.e., he always sticks to the theme.

It is impossible to deal with the close motivic relationship of the first and fourth movements with the second and third ones, in this article, but they are so obvious, that the reader can easily determine them for himself.

In conclusion, it remains to be said, that such a dense and perfect (in the truest sense of the word) composition, requires a corresponding level of performance, by way of which the "sour cherries" can become edible. And, since we unfortunately have no recordings by Brahms himself, or by his friend Joachim (who, as we know from his letters to Brahms, was very careful in performing such works), we have to listen to those conductors, who considered the performance of Classical music an endeavor coming truly from the heart. And among them, Wilhelm Furtwängler, in whose maternal family Johannes Brahms was often received as a guest, is surely the best, as he expresses the increasing "density of inventions" (Joseph Joachim) and "enormous manifoldness" (Clara Schumann) of the Finale both energetically and passionately. Especially his live recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, some of which can luckily still be heard (among them, the one from Oct. 24, 1948), since they are available on recordings and CDs, are still (and especially!) today a measure of the fact, of how extraordinarily alive ("*Energico e passionato*") Classical

FIGURE 8.8

Passage from the 'Adagio Sostenuto' of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 106



FIGURE 8.9

Lydian intervals among the strings in opening of Brahms' Fourth



works sound, if performed with "heart and mind," as well as with "certainty and passion."

1. Karl Geiringer, *Brahms, His Life and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 83.

2. *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms, 1853-1896*, ed. by Berthold Litzmann (London: 1927; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1979).

3. *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Joseph Joachim*, ed. by Andreas Moser (Berlin: 1908).

4. Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1976; reprint of 1904-14 edition), Vol. III, p. 455. Pages 445ff. contain a detailed account of this "unfortunate" performance.

5. That Joachim took the interpretation of Bach's Chaconne extraordinarily seriously, is demonstrated by the fact, that during his years in

Berlin, he performed this piece only on a Stradivarius violin, which he considered especially well suited for this kind of music because of its exceptional tonal qualities. On all appropriate occasions, he borrowed this particular violin from a Berlin violinmaker who owned it. This Stradivarius, which because of this fact was named the Chaconne, was played for many years by the first violinist of the Amadeus Quartet, Norbert Brainin.

6. Berthold Litzmann, *op. cit.*

7. The chaconne was originally a form of aria—not a dance—of the Seventeenth Century, which allowed the *bel canto* singer to improvise freely. Its "support" was a bass line, which repeated a certain pattern: It started on the tonic, moved slightly downwards, and then upwards again to the tonic. While initially different concerning the characteristics of their respective bass lines, the terms "chaconne" and "passacaglia" became increasingly interchangeable during the Eighteenth Century.