

## Form and narrative

I have always been greatly struck by the fact that Brahms, destroying some works, chose to begin the catalogue of his works with three sonatas for the piano. As if he had wanted to say: 'I am a (great) pianist, and for me the sonata is not an obsolete form, but one still worthy to be developed by musicians who wish to harvest the fruits of the best of the German tradition.' Let us examine for a moment this implicit affirmation.

Brahms appeared on the musical scene at a point in history where the premature death of Chopin, Schumann's descent into twilight, the fresh memories of Mendelssohn, Liszt at the height of his fame, as well as the ordinary 'virtuosos' in circulation at the time, created a panorama of extraordinary richness. So for Brahms to present three sonatas was an act of great ambition and courage. The Romantic 'fragment', raised by Chopin and Schumann to sublime levels, the programmatic music of Liszt, and beside him the growth of the Wagner phenomenon all conspired to have the sonata form declared out of favour, the product of past days of glory which could never be recalled. To make his debut with not one but three sonatas on the scale of Op.2, Op.1 and Op.5 was an utterly reckless declaration; all the more so given that Brahms had not been able to avoid having to confront what were to him the greatest figures of the past, Beethoven and Schumann (hints of whose style surface, consciously or unconsciously, here and there in his sonatas).

But just as striking, for me, is the fact that piano sonatas disappear from Brahms' catalogue after Op.5. As if the triple experiment had been exhausted with neither victor nor vanquished, and had to be abandoned so he could invest his own talent in other forms. I cannot think that Brahms, a sincerely self-critical man (he had his sketches corrected by Joachim), could have been satisfied with what he had achieved. Rather, I think that his artistic progress falls into homogeneous zones in which the disciplined, reflective, methodical musician concentrated his efforts on a single problem as deeply as he possibly could at the time. Having done as much as he could, he then turned his attention elsewhere. Indeed, within his catalogue of piano works we can easily distinguish a sonata period, a variations period, a 'Klavierstücke' period, without any kind of overlap or mixing between them. This is a very interesting trait, not just of the musician but also of the man.

We should not let our admiration for the grandeur of the project, and for the Cyclopean vision within which the three sonatas were conceived, prevent us from noticing how many of Brahms' principle qualities are in these early works still in a formative state. Books on Brahms, I find, do not apply this observation to the composer's sense of rhythm. Yet with regard to Opp.1, 2, 4 and 5, it is precisely the rhythm that merits discussion, because in these works the rhythmic structure is developed in so marked and obvious a fashion as to relegate the melodic line and the harmonic fabric to second rank.

If we listen to these pieces with critical ears and try for a moment to put to one side the rhythmic scansion which is so characteristic, concentrating on the melody and the harmony, we will find melodies which are, frankly, modest and/or generic, and rather weak 'hinge' harmonies, in the very nerve centres in which the harmony creates and sustains the structure of the piece. These deficiencies, which I could point out one by one, are almost concealed by the inexhaustible and strongly energetic rhythmic motor which carries them along. In particular, the reduction in melodic invention does not occur in places where one would expect it from composers of lesser ability, nor in the slow movements (which on the contrary are certainly the best), but rather in the concluding allegros, in the Rondos.

Here, apart from the problem of linking refrain and couplets, the quality of the new melodies which appear in the couplets themselves is puzzling – the mature Brahms would without doubt have considered these inadequate. Let me be even more precise: what I am imputing to these melodies is an indisputable, impersonal gloss of Romantic sentimentalism, that rather

syrupey expression that we esteem so little in the poorer music of the second half of the 19th century – a sentimentalism which will be deliberately avoided in the musical contents of the Klavierstücke (even though at times they teeter on the brink of a tumble into excessive sweetness) and which in any case will be relegated to obscurity, in particular in the ‘light’ and popular music of our time.

Turning to the Rondos of the sonatas, it is very interesting to look at the endings of Op.1 and Op.5, both marked by an acceleration of the tempo. This fascinating stylistic trait was developed in formidable style by Robert Schumann: even looking just at his works for the piano, there are many, many instances of a gradual and/or unexpected acceleration towards the end of a piece. In his Op.11, Op.14 and Op.22 sonatas, there are five; which is to say that all the movements in a fast tempo except for one end with an accelerando.

What does this mean? An excess of energy, a swelling of emotion, an opening onto the vortex of the unknown? None of us can find the right words. It is certain that this splendid expression of Schumann’s passionate character found an echo in the sonatas of Brahms, with results which I believe fall short of their model. It seems that at this particular moment in the composition, the motivating musical quality was falling away and weakening, almost as if the change of tempo were a programmed gesture rather than felt as necessary. These are the disadvantages of an inheritance not fully absorbed, but one which would gain importance in the later history of musical composition.

In Brahms’ Op.2, the fourth movement ends in a manner so discouraging for the performer that this sonata has not found a place in the traditional concert repertoire. Towards the end of the sonata-form movement, as the music is searching for the way out, it’s as if it actually comes apart and suspends itself in a sort of trance-like contemplation. The source, at a distance, could be Schumann, and it might only be lacking in personality, but to make things more difficult, the pianistic language is too legato, with old ideas and written in an old style; in short, what emerges from it is not well defined.

It is true that the very freshness and immaturity of the whole work makes it more attractive than Op.1: here Brahms, conscious of the uncertain results of the first movement of the F sharp minor sonata [which he completed before Op.1], tries a more considered and controlled path, if at the cost of spontaneity. But he finds no answer to the problem in which Mozart was the master of all sonatists: the transition from one idea to another, the natural evolution of the elements contained in the exposition of sonata-form – a problem that will only be completely resolved with Brahms’ development of the technique of continuous development. If I can attempt a definition which will encompass all three sonatas, I would consider them three progressive attempts to confront and resolve their inherent formal problem: a comparison of the three works reveals them as a triple solution to a single thought.

The jewels that these sonatas raise to Empyrean heights, the four slow movements (Op.5 has two), show with crystal clarity how the development of his lieder writing was fundamental to Brahms, and how it enters into every expressive moment, whatever the instrumental language. There are various musicological studies on the direct links between musical phrases in the Andante movements of Op.1 and Op.2 and poetic texts. In practical terms, Brahms’ melodies have a ‘secret’ text that could be sung to them. He is a little like Schumann: both of them liked to preserve ‘within’ the music a small esoteric, enigmatic element, revealed to the select Friends of a restricted circle.

Linking the music with a text makes it possible to tell a story with the notes, to conceive the music as journey and content, exactly as the young Schumann had expressed it in theory and practice, revolutionising the Beethovenian heritage. But there is more. This musical dualism between ‘absolute’ music and music as narrative found in Brahms a quiet point of balance, in strong contrast with the Music of the Future of Wagner and Liszt, all directed towards the need to acquire extramusical meaning. This equilibrium permitted Brahms to write chamber

music, symphonic music and music for piano at the highest level, at the same time creating lieder of astounding subtlety where the meaning of every word is commented upon and amplified by the music, much more than in the programmatic Symphonic Poems of Liszt and company.

The capacity to tell a story with music found its first, tremendous expression in the Op.10 Ballades, a prodigy of maturity from a 21-year-old composer. Here the preoccupation with form is relaxed, making room for the creation of utterly personal spaces in which cultured ideas are married with no apparent strain to a new and effective pianistic language. Here we see the A-B-A ternary form of the Scherzo, privileged vessel for so many Romantic masterpieces, which for the Klavierstücke will be chosen as the definitive solution. (Schumann had elaborated the three-part form in a much more complex fashion to the point of turning it into a Great Form.) But the chronology of the general catalogue of Brahms' works gives the indisputable impression that the gigantic size of the first works, which achieves its maximum expression in the Handel Variations, is exhausted once and for all, and finds outlets in other grandiose works which do not employ the piano. The piano presents itself only as a splendid deuteragonist in chamber music, or the 'Kleine Stücke', to use a term from Schumann, of his maturity. In brief, the piano no longer as repository of great symphonic plans (think of the Op.15 concerto), but as a place of personal, introspective meditation, more through informal listening than on the stage, where the search shifts from form to harmony, from broad brush strokes to the subtle work of the engraver.

Michele Campanella © 2004

Translation: Natalie Shea

Symphony Australia