

**Voice leading and Emotional Transformation**  
**in**  
**Brahms's *Intermezzo in E-flat Minor*, Op. 118, No. 6**

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## **Introduction**

Although most older music histories typically emphasize his classical orientation,<sup>1</sup> Brahms consistently achieves the emotional heights of passion, tragedy, and serenity associated with his more radical contemporaries by masterfully balancing Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Upon first hearing, the *Intermezzo in E-flat Minor*, Op. 118, No. 6, seems to tilt dangerously towards the passionate, even hinting towards a programmatic message with its *dies irae* theme. The motivic unity and voice-leading structure, however, testifies to a solid compositional technique that balances coherence with this work's dark message. Brahms's particular use of these elements and classical formal design induce the effect of emotional transformation in this Op. 118, No.6.

## **A Mildly Romantic Description and Strong Emotional Transformation**

The intermezzo follows a typical ternary form, but with a repeated first section: AA' - B - A". The length of sections in measures is balanced, 20 (repeated) - 22 - 23, but time seems to progress at quite different rates. In the first sections, mm. 1–40, the pace seems to be nearly at a standstill, and symbolically, the theme enters alone. Here, Brahms establish a theme reminiscent

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<sup>1</sup>I will provide several examples of Brahms the conservative: Grout, etc.

of the *dies irae*, connoting a topic of death. After two bars (but many seconds later), the first harmony quietly sweeps like a gust of wind around the theme—it is dissonant and unsettling. The hushed dynamics along with dissonant harmonies, legato touch, and torpid harmonic rhythm depict a morose atmosphere.

In contrast, sprightly, almost noble, *staccato* notes spring forth in the B-section, mm. 41–62. The clearer, vertical chords and more strongly directed harmonies elicit a sense of increased pace until the quiet dynamic quickly swells into two *fortissimo* outbursts of the *dies irae*-like theme (mm. 53–54 and mm. 59–62). At both points, chromatic notes and other dissonances enhance the theme’s tragic quality. By the end of the section, the sense of movement and the gestures seem extraordinarily impassioned.

With the return of the opening material in the final section, mm. 63–86, the dolorous mood immediately subdues the previous outbursts. After just four bars, the A-material escapes into a dreamy passage. The now fragile melody descends from the highest, delicate register in m. 66 into a *dolce*, otherworldly harmonic realm (mm. 67–70). In mm. 71–74, a strong dominant sonority and pedal point forces the E-flat minor reality upon the listener. At first, the volume and melody swells. In mm. 73–74, the melody leaps irrationally between bizarre accidentals. This emotional upsurge briefly slips back into the dream with a deceptive motion in the bass and the melody trails off into a dark register. The final *dies irae* statements, mm. 78ff, effectively recall the listener again from the dream to death’s reality both with its *pianissimo*, contemplative melancholy and with its *fortissimo*, emotive tragedy.

The harmonic events and textures strongly suggest an emotional transformation. The melodic and emotional content could even inspire some listeners and performers to summon

vivid images and situations with several plausible narratives.<sup>2</sup> Such romantic interpretations may have until recently been out of fashion—after all, one cannot easily ascertain composers’ thoughts outside the musical score. Nevertheless, thoughts of death certainly seem to pervade the emotional content. Most listeners would even agree that the emotional transformation occurs within a solitary person who probably feels loss. At first, this individual contemplates loss (A), remembers and experiences tragedy (B), escapes into a dream (A’). With the last two *dies irae* statements, perhaps he or she accepts death’s finality. A more narrative would be hard to justify without Brahms’s words and approval.<sup>3</sup>

### **Classical Underpinnings: Hypermeter and Motive**

Several unusual moments occur in the structure of the work, but overall the intermezzo displays solid and traditional craftsmanship with its typical balanced tenary design. Other than two expressive expansions towards the end of the B-section, a regular four-bar hypermeter proceeds throughout. Both these expansions accompany significant prolongations of the dominant harmony. The first occurs at a normal place, the retransition, but with special narrative meaning (to be discussed later). The second occurs in the especially expressive moment in mm. 73–74 described earlier.

Working like obsessive rumination, melodic motions seem almost excessively permeated by third motives. This prevalent “thought,” motive x, descends stepwise from G-flat to E-flat.

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<sup>2</sup>Though specific images may not be ascertained without more cues from the composer, the sense of narrative is strong. Cite Newcomb, Maus, and the literature on hermeneutics.

<sup>3</sup>Other fanciful interpretations may involve wind-swept graves stones (A), dancing skeletons (B), and the hazy return of the stark cemetery (A’). The gravity of the work, however, dissuades me from this hyper-romantic interpretation that leans towards macabre entertainment.

The opening *dies irae* melody, mm. 1–4, contains two motives embedded within the motive itself. (See Example 1. The motive usually implies compound melody.) The inversion, x', ascends from E-flat to G-flat in m. 2 and occurs less frequently in the intermezzo. For the remainder of the first section, mm. 8–20, thirds accompany the x motive.

Except for m. 13 and mm. 17–19 where the motive is transposed into the dominant, the melody descends from G-flat to E-flat in every measure of the A section. Time moves so slowly, because only two harmonies truly function and the obsessive use of motive x. Coupling between two registers provides sufficient variety. The second half of the A section derives much of its compulsive energy from over-reaching of inner voices. (Some analysts may prefer to interpret these motions as movement only within the top voice, but the overlapping of melodic material along with physical movement of the pianist's hands seems to encourage my interpretation.)

In the B-section (mm. 41–56), the x motive becomes more ornamental; it leads to longer, more structural notes. A few linear progressions do not emphasize the third, but those in mm. 45–47 (x') and mm. 47–49 (x) do. The *dies irae* melody in mm. 52–55 and mm. 59–62 obviously present the motive and prepare for the return of A. By the way, I hear two interpretations of mm. 49–55. I chose a fifth progression with an augmented second between B-flat and A that outlines an E-flat minor harmony (6/4 over B-flat pedal) and prolongs B-flat in the top voice. Alternatively, one could hear the secondary leading tone, A-natural, suspended while a tonal parenthesis introduces the *dies irae*. It finally resolves upwards to B-flat in m. 56. The psychological effect of a parenthesis here can be powerful, and it demarks the motive x strongly.

In the dreamy areas of the A''-section (mm. 63–86), the stepwise third disappears as a

structural motive, but thirds abound in harmonies and parallel third passages. Leaps of thirds do occur in the voice-exchanges but seem to attract less attention. Instead, the focus seems to shift to harmony, and for the first time, a strong linear progression ascends. This motion could be symbolic of emotional transformation. Brahms emphasizes this inner voice movement in mm. 70–74 with a *crescendo* and strong dominant-like pedal point.

### **Romantic Narrative: Voice-leading and Harmony**

Underneath the solitary opening, an implicit E-flat pedal tone drones, implying a ghost-like tonic harmony.<sup>4</sup> When harmony appears in m. 3, a fully-diminished sonority sweeps up and down. As the theme repeats in a lower register at m. 5, the E-flat apparition sounds more solidly in the bass. The unsettling sonority between both tonic harmonies can be seen to be the result of inner-voice neighbor motions above the implied E-flat drone. (See the voice-leading graph in Example 1.)

When the A material returns in m. 63, the notes on the score are very similar, as one would expect. The theme occurs in the lower register and is accompanied by the diminished-seventh sweep. An explicit E-flat pedal drone is missing, and the sweep enters only after two beats. One could legitimately claim that E-flat minor arrives implicitly before embarking on new harmonic and psychological territory in m. 67. Such an interpretation would make the bass E-flat in m. 66 a structural tonic that belatedly (diagonally) supports the *dies irae* melody starting in m. 63.

With the weak support of tonic and the harmonic context before and afterwards, however,

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<sup>4</sup>This implicit E-flat harmonic support does not become explicit until the first *dies irae* statement of A' in m. 21.

the A'' section seems to avoid such an orthodox arrival on tonic and reassertion of the primary tone despite the traditional strong dominant closing the B-section in m. 57. At first, the retransition, mm. 57–62, prolongs the dominant harmony and emphasizes the leading tone in the soprano of m. 57 and m. 59. But the outburst of the *dies irae* theme in m. 60 introduces a fully-diminished sonority that trails off into an unexpected A-flat dominant-seventh harmony. Neither sonority resolves. Immediately, A'' ushers in the somber *dies irae* over a fully-diminished sonority that resolves to B-flat in m. 65. As the graph shows, the remarkable transition and the first phrase of A'' both prolong neighbor harmonies to the bass B-flat. Unlike the opening, the bass E-flat in m. 66 is simply part of a motion towards the ethereal submediant chord and Neapolitan harmonic realm. This view of the retransition supports the idea of a transformational narrative, as opposed to a series of isolated and contrasting moods typical of classical A-B-A form.

Also symbolic of the emotional transformation, the B and A'' sections dovetail. The A'' section should begin with two consecutive thematic statements, one in the higher register and one in the lower. The upper statement occurs in the turbulent retransition. The sudden dynamic and texture change clearly indicates that A'' begins with the second, lower-pitched statement.

The Neapolitan and submediant areas invoke a dreamy atmosphere with distant accidentals scattered amongst the familiar melodic material. The bass from mm. 66–70 outlines a Neapolitan harmony, which continues to be prolonged until m. 74 when it transforms into a subdominant harmony through a 6–5 motion. Above this Neapolitan prolongation, the rare ascent from A-flat to E-flat in mm. 70–74 symbolizes some sort of emotional transformation. Earlier I described the strong dominant sonority that yields an emotional upsurge here; this apparent harmony turns out to be passing, indicating the reality of the situation but prolonging

the dreamworld a little longer.

Like A, the A''-section ends with a low, somber *dies irae*. A more impassioned restatement of the *dies irae* in the obligatory register contains the final cadence. There, the G-flat forms a dissonant seventh against the bass A-flat. The dominant and tonic harmonies are relatively swift and powerful. The loud dynamic immediately dissipates into solemn block chords that delay the bass E-flat for two measures. The slow, conclusive arpeggio seems to span eternity with its dark and inevitable E-flat minor chord.

### **Romantic Narrative: Form and the Background Level**

At first, one might expect that the first A and A' sections prolong tonic and terminate with an interruption. The B-section then would prolong the dominant and second scale degree. The last section, A'', would then reassert the primary tone, G-flat, descend to tonic, and close with a traditional cadence. My interpretation of the retransition and beginning of A'', however, make such a plan impossible.

Example 2 presents a radical solution. The A-section establishes G-flat as a primary tone, and it ends with an interruption. The B-section establishes B-flat as the true primary tone! And, A'' contains a stepwise *urlinie* descent from B-flat to E-flat. In this case, the tonal structure strongly disagrees with the ternary design between the second and third sections. The resulting *Ursatz* also displays parallel octaves, which may be disturbing to some readers.

A less radical explanation (Example 3) solves the parallel octaves by placing these same notes on different interpretative levels. Here, the A-section ends with what sounds like an interruption. The B-section prolongs B-flat through a consonant skip from F. In the A''-section,



a deep middle-ground third motive descends from A-flat to F, still prolonging the second scale degree, F. The A” closes the *Ursatz* with a strong perfect authentic cadence. I personally prefer this second interpretation.

A related solution (Example 4) places a middle-ground tonic harmony at the beginning of A” with a G-flat neighbor tone to the background F. This seems plausible and would articulate the ternary design more. In the last solution (Example 5), the B-flat descent to F prolongs the penultimate dominant harmony.

Notice that all solutions fuse the B and A” sections together through harmony and voice-leading. Only texture and dynamics differentiate the formal design. Other than the first solution in Example 2, all have one, uninterrupted descent that does not interpret the G-flat of the final *dies irae* in mm. 81–82 as structural—an interpretation of the motive that differs significantly from the motive through the rest of the work. The effect of an interruption, even if nonextant in the background, seems to be present. Thus, on the surface, the topics associated with the somber A section and the ennobled B section are as distinct as classical A-B-A form, but, beneath, the emotional journey transforms with the uninterrupted large-scale ascent to the primary tone and the slow, inevitable descent to tonic.

### **Summary: Emotional Transformation expressed through Form and Voice leading**

The first A sections not only capture the emotional condition of a bereaved individual, but also paint an incomplete and yet lethargic situation by its tonal motion. He or she obsessively mulls over one motive as time moves languidly.

The middle B section prolongs the dominant harmony, and most musical elements

contrast the first. The non-tonic, dynamic quality of the musical material seems to recall more noble thoughts that are eventually interrupted by tragedy as symbolized by the return of the *dies irae* theme.

When the narrative returns to quiet contemplation, the bereaved has progressed to a new place, A". He or she reminisces over the same material but escapes into a happier or, at least, a distant place, much like the harmony. Perhaps the mourner imagines the soul ascending in that dreamy world with the only upward motion of the A sections. By repeating the original theme twice at the end, the bereaved accepts the reality that he or she must live with loss.

A

m.1                      m.4                      m.7                      m.10

Handwritten musical score for section A, measures 1-10. The score is in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of three flats. It includes fingerings (1-4), slurs, and various annotations like 'x', 'P', 'N', and 'Np'. Below the staff are guitar chord diagrams for measures 1, 4, 7, and 10, and Roman numeral harmonizations: I, (b<sup>b</sup>:II)<sup>2</sup>, V<sup>7</sup>, and I.

e<sup>b</sup>m: I

B

m.41                      m.45                      m.49

Handwritten musical score for section B, measures 41-50. The score is in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of three flats. It includes fingerings (1-4), slurs, and various annotations like 'x', 'Np', and 'N'. Below the staff are guitar chord diagrams for measures 41, 45, 49, and 50, and Roman numeral harmonizations: (b<sup>b</sup>:VI), II, V, I, (e<sup>b</sup>m: [V]), and b9.

e<sup>b</sup>m: V

m. 14 m. 19 A' m. 33

Varied repetition of A

V I V

m. 55 m. 57 m. 59 m. 66

retransition A''

V I V VI

4/2 entry to the final m. 65-9 to obscure A'' return

# Brahms Intermezzo in e<sup>b</sup>m, op. 118, no. 6

m. 70

m. 74

m. 79

3 4 [8-1/8] 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1

P (sounds like V)

bII (=IV<sup>sub6</sup>) IV

BACKGROUND

m. 1

m. 13

m. 41 63

m. 79

A B A'' A BA'

I V V IV 6-5 VI I V IV V I I V IV V I I V IV

↑

should be I to reset chromatic 5, which suggest missing.

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4

Example

Handwritten musical notation for Example 5. The notation is spread across three staves. The top staff features a melodic line with notes and rests, including a triplet of eighth notes marked '3' and '79' above it. The middle staff shows a bass line with notes and rests, including a '7' chord and a '7#' chord. The bottom staff contains Roman numerals 'V' and 'I' indicating chord positions. A diagonal line with a crossbar is drawn across the middle and bottom staves, possibly indicating a measure boundary or a specific rhythmic pattern.

Handwritten musical notation for Example 5, showing a sequence of notes and chords. The notation is spread across three staves. The top staff features a melodic line with notes and rests, including a 'BA' label. The middle staff shows a bass line with notes and rests. The bottom staff contains Roman numerals 'I', 'V', 'IV', 'V', 'I' indicating chord positions.

Example 5