

# Brahms, String Quintet No. 2, Op. 111: II. Adagio Analysis

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Although this movement is built on the model of theme and variations (which is usual for the slow movement of a sonata cycle), the variations are of a special sort that might better be described as ‘versions.’ Rather than presenting a main theme in different clothes, the movement states it several times, but each time stressing a different aspect of it, and extracting different consequences from it.

## 1 The theme

The theme is made up of four ideas, of which two are essential and two accessory. In Table 1,  $\mathcal{A}$  and  $\mathcal{B}$  represent the essential ideas.  $\mathcal{A}$  is basically a movement from  $i$  to  $V$  through  $vii^\circ/V$ , by means of the two basic motives  $a$  and  $b$  (upper and lower parts in Table 1). It is interesting to note how the dissonance in this late Romantic piece is on its way to emancipation: no single leading tone is resolved, and the dissonant tones of the  $vii^\circ$  move freely. On the other hand, although  $b$  does not have a fixed contour (its second statement in m. 2 moves down and then leaps up), its original scalar form is an important marker for its recognition and referentiality at other moments of the form.

The last chord of  $\mathcal{A}$ —a dominant chord—is followed by the surprise of an applied dominant to F major, that inaugurates  $\mathcal{B}$ . This dominant and its resolution in m. 4 undergo prominent arpeggiation, an idea that will be developed later. The term ‘*pseudo-sequence*’ in the description of  $\mathcal{B}$  in Table 1 is an important notion for my analysis of this movement.




Part	mm.	Description	Tonal area
<i>A</i>	1–2	 $i - vii^\circ / V - V$ ; motives <i>a</i> , <i>b</i>	D
<i>B</i>	3–8	arpeggiation – ‘pseudo-sequence’	F → A
<i>C</i>	9–12	 appoggiaturas on the dominant chord	D
<i>D</i>	13–14	 mostly melodic link	D

Table 1: The four sections of the ‘theme’

It means that the passage is constructed on the basis of an ‘underlying’ harmonic scheme. This underlying scheme is sequentially repeated, *but* with slight differences in the surface detail that in effect modify the sounding harmonic result. Procedures of this kind are fairly common in Brahms, and tend to take place in areas of tonal ambiguity where there is no strong harmonic direction and therefore no danger that the differences in detail jeopardize comprehensibility. The underlying scheme, full of unresolved dominants, is itself hardly goal-oriented (harmonically).

a)   
A:  $Ger_6$   $i_3^4$   $V/III$   $G: Ger_6$   $i_3^4$   $V/III$   $F: Ger_6$   $i_3^4$

b)   
A:  $Ger_6$   $C: I_6$   $V$   $bIII$   $F: IV_6$   $I$   $vi^{-5}$   $V$

Figure 1: Underlying and superficial levels of the ‘pseudo-sequence’ in *B*, mm. 4–7

The first of these passages is part of *B* in the first statement of the theme, and it takes place in mm. 4–6. Figure 1a shows the underlying harmonic scheme (abstracted from all the parallel passages in the piece), where the sequential pattern is apparent. Figure 1b shows the harmonic progression of the first realization (mm. 4–6) of this underlying scheme. Omission

of notes and chromatic inflections obscure the strictness of the sequence. Note that an appeal to the notion of ‘tonal’ (as opposed to ‘real’) sequence is not compelling to explain the differences between the two levels, for there is no stable tonal center for the tonalness of the sequence to refer to.



Figure 2: Reduction of measure 7

The pseudo-sequence in the statement of the theme completes a cycle, from the dominant of F—to the dominant of F. This latter chord is then converted into the dominant of A, in a way that is also very important throughout the piece. The reduction in Figure 4 shows the most important features of this conversion: on the one hand, the emphasis on E (originally a leading tone) hints at its coming re-interpretation as the root of the chord (the dominant of A). The back-and-forth oscillations (F: V–i–V) in the violin I and the cello (F: V–i–V; lower staff of Figure 4) also prepare the conversion, with the tone  $A\flat$  that will be re-interpreted as  $G\sharp$ . The conversion is complete by the final arpeggio in the cello, where C Major (F: V) is modified into A minor (A:  $i_6$ ). The circled note indicates the next bass-note (this circling will be relevant later).

Thus  $\mathcal{B}$  concludes with an A major chord dissolving from tremolo into silence. The passage of mm. 3–7 (which, as already noted, starts and ends in a dominant of F major), is framed by two dominants of D minor. Harmonically,  $\mathcal{B}$  it is therefore ‘nothing more’ than an interpolation. However, it is from this section of the theme that most of the developmental procedures of the movement stem.

$\mathcal{C}$  features an ornamentation of the chord of A (now with the seventh, making it a clear dominant of D minor) with melodic appoggiaturas and a pedal-point on A. The revival of

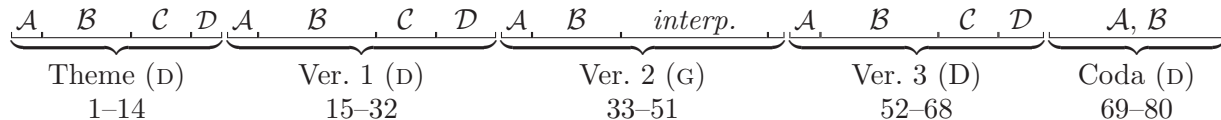


Figure 3: Form of the movement in terms of the theme's ideas.

the music is crowned by the appearance of motive *b* in m. 12, after which the sixteenth-note triplet is expanded into a melodic link (*D*) that leads to the next version of the theme in mm. 15ff.

## 2 The 'versions'

Throughout the first presentation of the theme (except for the four measures of *C*), the first viola has had the melody and the lead. The first version of the theme, mm. 15–32, can be seen as the 'violin I version:' *A*, for example, is transposed up an octave, so that vl. I, vl. II, vla. II play exactly what vla. I, vla. II, vc. had played in the theme. This is furthermore played *pp*. It is hard to call this a 'variation,' and the name 'version' seems more appropriate; we will see in addition that the versions do not necessarily follow the theme's harmonic plan, which is one of the main characteristics of 'theme and variations' movements.

Figure 3 summarizes the form of the piece in terms of the four ideas of the theme (lengths in the Figure are proportional to the number of measures of each section). Version 1, as suggested, consists mainly of a re-statement of the theme in a higher register and a brighter sound. Not only *A*, but also *D*, bring the melody from the first viola to the first violin I. The arpeggiations of *B* are also partly given to the high register. To be noted also is the fact that the pseudo-sequence of *B* is 'neglected' in this version: *B* is represented only by the mentioned arpeggiations. *C*, on the other hand, modulates to G minor, where the next version starts after *D*.

In section *A* of Version 2 (m. 33) a process begins to unfold that will continue throughout the remainder of the piece: general rhythmic intensification. The pizzicato accompaniment to the theme goes now in sixteenth-, not eighth-notes. The sixteenth-note motorrhythm will persist (as a new element) throughout *B*. Apart from this, however, *B* (mm. 35–40) returns

very close to its original form, being an almost literal transposition of the original mm. 3–8 (with violin I taking over the part of viola I, that now plays sixteenth-notes). Just as in the original statement  $\mathcal{B}$  led from F to A major, here (after  $\mathcal{A}$  in G minor) it leads from B $\flat$  to D major.

What follows in mm. 40–50 is the most interesting and intense passage of the piece (I have called it an ‘interpolation’), and it will be treated below. Measure 51, after that, presents a condensed version of  $\mathcal{C}$  and  $\mathcal{D}$  together, but this leads to the next Version before their recognition is established.

Version 3 features much more rhythmic activity. Triplets accompany a D major version of  $\mathcal{A}$ , and in mm. 56–7 the arpeggiations of  $\mathcal{B}$  are enlivened by a ‘micro-synopation.’ There are allusions to the pseudo-sequence in the form of characteristic motives (see especially the ‘cello part in mm. 58–60), and then the culmination of the rhythmic process takes place with a substantially modified  $\mathcal{C}$ : appoggiaturas on the chord of five, over a pedal point on A. This time the rhythmic activity is frantic, the passage is extended, and the dynamic level is the highest in the movement. The tension is released as  $\mathcal{D}$  (also rhythmically intensified) ascends and descends back to D minor.

The coda is ‘calm after the storm.’ Back in original rhythm, *espressivo* and *dolce*, it restates, in addition to  $\mathcal{A}$ , some of the motives from other parts of the movement, that have hitherto not been prominent: the first violin’s m. 71 is a hint of  $\mathcal{B}$  (for a similar rhythm accompanies the arpeggiations from the background); mm. 75–6 are a reference to the slow interpolation of mm. 40–50. The coda states  $\mathcal{A}$  twice, the first time (m. 69) in D minor, the second in (or rather, *on*, for the key is still D) G minor. The latter is a traditional procedure stemming from the cadences of the modal period and the idea of Piccardy’s third in the Baroque: with the emphasis on the key of iv, the final cadence in (major) I sounds like a half-cadence, or a cadence in the Lydian mode. The long pedal-point on tonic in the bass is also an essential part of the procedure.

### 3 The interpolation of measures 40–50

Measures 40 through 50 feature the most developmentally intense passage of the piece. It is called an ‘interpolation’ here, in the view that it is placed between  $\mathcal{B}$  and  $\mathcal{C}$  (the latter condensed and fused with  $\mathcal{D}$ ). Harmonically, just as  $\mathcal{B}$  was an interpolation within the theme (see page 3), the passage of mm. 40–50 starts and ends with dominant chords of the key of D, so that it only cycles around that dominant (saying this should of course not to underplay the importance of the passage). I finish my analysis with a relatively detailed discussion of this passage.

Constructively, this interpolation is a heavy development of  $\mathcal{B}$ . Two main processes take place here, both of them derived from ideas and procedures first seen in  $\mathcal{B}$ . The first process is the ‘re-interpretation’ of chords (by re-spelling and modified resolution), and receives an interesting treatment in the successions of quarter-notes of mm. 40–1 and 43–7. Three times around, a major chord of I is followed by  $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\flat\text{VI}$  (which is in effect I’s own dominant but in a diminished quality). Thus at mm. 40–1 we have D major followed by A diminished; later we have G Major–D diminished, and still after that there is C major–G diminished.

The first diminished-seventh chord— $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\text{B}\flat$ —is resolved normally, to  $\text{B}\flat$ . The second, however, is re-interpreted not to be  $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\text{E}\flat$  but  $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\text{C}$ . It takes one more beat, but finally resolves to C at m. 45. And the diminished seventh chord that follows,  $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\text{A}\flat$ , is re-interpreted as  $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\text{F}$ , and *then again* re-interpreted as  $\text{vii}_7^\circ/\text{D}$ . Thus, the diminished seventh chord (the favorite of all time to undergo re-interpretation) is re-interpreted first 0 times, then 1 time, then 2 times.

Figure 4 summarizes the second process taking place in this passage. In this process, the development of thematic material is more directly present: the original from measure 7 (see discussion in page 3) is gradually developed and varied. Thus, measure 42 is simply a transposition and re-organization of the original, up a minor ninth into  $\text{E}\flat$  (starting with its dominant). As such, this measure and the following two are a sequential iteration of mm. 39–41.

Figure 4 consists of three parts: a), b), and c). Part a) shows a musical score for a measure with three staves. The top staff has a triplet of eighth notes. The middle staff has a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff has a triplet of eighth notes, with the middle note circled. Part b) shows three variations of the measure, each with three staves. The first variation is labeled 'transposed/reorganized'. The second variation is labeled 'tenor & bass conflated: G<sub>4</sub> rather than B<sub>b</sub>'. The third variation is labeled 'transposed/enriched'. Part c) shows two rhythmic patterns: 'original' and 'modified'. The 'original' pattern is a triplet of eighth notes. The 'modified' pattern is a triplet of eighth notes, with the middle note circled.

Figure 4: Measure 7 and its variations

Then, after the diminished-seventh chords elongation (the ‘first process’ detailed above), the figure is retaken for development. This time there is an important rhythmic variation (see Figure 4c), whose result is the fact that the figure takes one more beat to complete (this also happens in the other process, cf. above). Ternary rhythm organization is thus stressed in mm. 48–50 (the triplets take over the rhythmic unit, and the meter expresses actually two measures of  $\frac{3}{4}$ ).

But pitch-oriented development is more intense and complex. Abstracting the rhythmic modification so as to make the resemblance closer, Figure 4b summarizes this development (Figure 4a contains the original version of this measure, and is in fact identical to Figure ?? above). Probably the main thing that remains unchanged throughout the process is the fact that the middle note of the bass triplet (the circled note in Figures 4a, b) is the note

that is chosen as the bass of the chord that follows the figure. Apart from that (and the general contour, of course), everything is changed in one way or another. Varied is even the fact that the upper-voices (as depicted in the example) usually stress the leading tone of the key to which the figure modulates (see page 3 above): in the most radical of these variations, the one at m. 48 (Figure 4*b*, middle), the first chord is not a major chord anymore (B $\flat$ ), but a minor chord in second inversion (G). This is achieved by the exchange between bass and tenor: the original fifth is converted into a fourth. Since the upper-voices ‘should’ have attacked the triplets on B $\sharp$  rather than D, they too contribute to the change. This relationship of a third between ‘possibilities’ for the triplet gesture is fully realized in the last variation, mm. 49–50, where the figure is applied to both tones of the third.

Because of the developmental context in which these variations take place, and the sequential nature of the diminished-seventh-chords process, the fact that the bass moves in ascending thirds from one variation to the next is perceived as a sequence. It is clear that the sequence is not strict. This is indeed a very developed example of ‘pseudo-sequence,’ the notion I introduced when speaking about  $\mathcal{B}$ . Thus the interpolation of mm. 40–50 is a deep and complete study of the possibilities of  $\mathcal{B}$ .