



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 07, Issue 10, 2018: 38-52

Article Received: 03-09-2018

Accepted: 02-10-2018

Available Online: 18-10-2018

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v7i10.1489>

A Tale of Two Finales: “Correcting” the Ninth in the Finale of Brahms’s First Symphony¹

Ayah Rifai²

ABSTRACT

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony earns its place as a seminal work in historical narratives because Beethoven had brought into question the aesthetic superiority of instrumental music over vocal music at a crucial historical juncture, when the former had recently established itself as a category of greater rank over the latter. In opening the Ninth to voices in the finale, Wagnerians assert that Beethoven declared that the symphony had “run its course” and had to be improved by the addition of voices, thus undermining the transcendental qualities of instrumental music. In the finale of his First Symphony, Brahms follows a similar trajectory to that of Beethoven’s choral finale but then “misreads” it by choosing to remain purely instrumental with the main theme. Some scholars have viewed this gesture as a divergence from the progressive idea of the symphony that Beethoven had initiated. Drawing on previous scholarship, I examine the contextual significance of Brahms’s finale and delineate how he deviates from the Ninth finale in additional ways. This study also addresses a minor gap in critical writing by exploring the topic of religion and pinning down the function of the instrumental chorale, which has hitherto received limited scholarly attention. Building upon the work of Matthew Gelbart, I discuss how the chorale operates on several symbolic levels, allowing Brahms to pay homage to Beethoven and other composers in music history while simultaneously reinvigorating the post-Beethovenian symphonic genre and inscribing himself into its lineage.

Keywords: Beethoven, Brahms, First Symphony, instrumental chorale, Ninth Symphony.

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1. Introduction

November 1876 must have seemed, for a fleeting moment, like the best of times and the worst of times for Johannes Brahms. After the premiere of his First Symphony—a work 21 years in the making since its initial sketches, with critical reception ranging from sneers to approbation—someone remarked that the main theme of the finale bears a striking resemblance to Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” theme from the finale of his Ninth Symphony. Brahms is said to have retorted gruffly: “Any jackass can see that!” The symphonies are, admittedly, related in the way that the finale themes are constructed both in terms of their formal function—a moment of triumphant arrival after a

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Ryan Minor of Stony Brook University for his insights and suggestions on a preliminary version of this article. I am also grateful to Dina Al-Rifai for her help in formatting the musical examples.

² Music educator, Brooklyn, NY. Email: ayah3184@yahoo.com

protracted struggle—and, most notably, in their memorable song-like qualities. Nevertheless, Brahms's alleged response challenges listeners to experience his symphony and evaluate its merit on its own terms, even with its conscious homage to Beethoven, rather than dwell upon similarities between the two works.

Indeed, Brahms's First Symphony is equally known for the way in which it differs from Beethoven's Ninth. As Harold Bloom (1973), Mark Evan Bonds (1996, p.2), and David Lee Brodbeck (1997, p. 73) argue, Brahms follows a similar trajectory to that of Beethoven's choral finale but then "misreads" it by choosing to remain purely instrumental—a gesture that has been interpreted by some scholars as "correcting" the Ninth (Bonds, 1996, p.3). Brahms also deviates from Beethoven in the way he concludes the symphony. In the coda, the mysterious chorale that was intoned earlier in the introduction to the movement appears again, rather than the optimistic lyrical theme one last time, as Beethoven's model might lead the listener to expect. What is intriguing about this gesture is that it does not simply play with listener expectations of form, but also begs the question of the specific resonance of the chorale—which reinserts the aspect of religion into the realm of "purely" instrumental music—and its role throughout the movement.³

Brahms's First is an enduring focus of musicological research because of its historical ramifications for the symphony in the post-Beethoven era (see Musgrave, 1983; Reynolds, 1985; Taruskin, 1989; Fink, 1993, Brodbeck, 1997b; Knapp, 1997; Brinkmann, 1999; Kramer, 2000; Frisch, 2003; and Bonds, 2006). The present study expands upon existing scholarship by delineating additional ways in which Brahms "corrects" the finale of Beethoven's Ninth. It also addresses a minor gap in critical writing by delving into the subject of religion and pinning down the purpose of the chorale—which plays a prominent role both thematically and within a wider context—a topic that has hitherto received limited scholarly attention (see Beller-McKenna, 2004, and Gelbart, 2009). The first section of this article examines Beethoven's Ninth at the nexus between religiosity and the dialectic of instrumental versus vocal music in order to contextually situate both the striking placement of the chorale within the symphony's dramatic narrative and Brahms's finale at large. The subsequent section outlines the ways in which Brahms's finale diverges from that of Beethoven's, and the third offers an interpretation of the chorale's function that draws upon the work of Matthew Gelbart. The coda reflects upon the implications of Brahms's finale as a compositional work in the post-Beethoven epoch and as an object of aesthetic pleasure.

2. Exposition: The colossal symphony

Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125 (1824) is both a monumental work musically and a seminal work historically. It is considered to be monumental because Beethoven alters and augments the genre of the symphony in numerous ways (see Bonds, 1996, pp. 15-22; Rumph, 2004, pp. 185-221; and Treitler, 1980, pp. 197-198): the work's cyclical coherence, its innovative formal design (both overarching and within individual movements), its fusion of genres (the symphony, concerto, and cantata), the function of text and voice, and the weighty role of the finale in resolving issues left unresolved in previous movements.

By extension, the "Choral" Symphony earns its place as a seminal work because Beethoven questioned the aesthetic superiority of instrumental music over vocal music at a crucial historical juncture, just as the former had putatively established itself as a category of greater rank over the latter. According to late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century writers and philosophers, it was instrumental music that possessed the ability to transport the listener from the corporeal, sensuous realm into the world of the metaphysical, thereby making it superior to vocal music and other arts (see Bonds, 1997). Moreover, it was the symphony in particular that was capable of reflecting the sentiments of a larger community. As Bonds (2006) points out, the symphony featured "a synthesis of heterogeneous timbres, without the soloist; its voices were many but essentially equal" (p. 15). While choral music naturally represents a communal act, instrumental music is considered unbound by text and thus possesses autonomy, enabling it to pose new questions of understanding and judgment. It was therefore venerated above vocal music.

³The instrumental chorale brings to the fore a topos that pervaded not just Brahms's symphonies but the symphonic works of other nineteenth-century composers as well, including Bruckner, Liszt, and Mahler.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, several writers perceived the Ninth through the lens of Richard Wagner. He argued that in opening the work to voices in the finale, Beethoven was declaring that the symphony had “run its course” and had to be improved by the addition of voices, thus undermining what instrumental music—especially the symphony—had come to represent:

Thus the master [Beethoven] forced his way through the most unheard-of possibilities of absolute tonal language—not by hurriedly stealing past them, but by proclaiming them completely, to their last sound, from his heart’s fullest depths—until he reached that point at which the navigator begins to sound the sea’s depths with his lead.... at which he touches solid bottom [and].... must decide whether to turn about into the fathomless ocean or whether to drop anchor in the new banks... Resolutely he threw out his anchor, and this anchor was the *word*. (as quoted in Strunk, 1998, p. 1108, emphasis in original)

Wading through Wagner’s nautical metaphors, we grasp that Beethoven’s Ninth is a symbol for the exhaustion of absolute music in general and the symphony in particular. But why the search for “the word?” According to the Wagnerian position, Beethoven was frustrated over his increasing inability to communicate with others as a result of his deafness and was searching for an outlet for immediacy of communication. He found it in the voice.

Beethoven’s Choral Symphony also resonates strongly with political overtones because of the ideas of collectivity and universality suggested by Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” text in the finale. While critical writing exists on the political implications of the Ninth (see Buch, 2003), one topic related to this symphony that is scarcely investigated is that of religion. It is therefore useful to consider some scholars who address the issue of religiosity in the Ninth, which in turn will allow us to better approach the chorale in the Brahms First finale.

For William Kinderman, religion manifests itself in “referential sonorities” that serve as a focal point for Beethoven’s musical settings. These sonorities are utilized first in the Credo of Beethoven’s *Missa solemnis* (1822) then two years later in the Ninth finale. In the Credo, the referential sonorities—an E-flat chord and a “Credo” motif in this case—are intoned at the beginning as an introductory gesture that unifies the movement through their recurrence, much like a ritornello. They also have important symbolic overtones: they appear three times in reference to the Holy Trinity, they sound together with the textual words of ascent and descent, and the high E-flat chords at the end—juxtaposed with low-register parts in the orchestra—evoke “celestial regions transcending earthly existence” (Kinderman, 1985, p. 115).⁴

Kinderman argues that Beethoven reused this network of referential sonorities in the framework of the Ninth finale, with the first link between the two works occurring at the climax with the words “*und der Cherub steht vor Gott*” (“and the cherub stands before the sight of God”; mm. 321-30). The music passes from the tonic D Major to A Major with the forceful repetition of “*vor Gott*,” and pauses unexpectedly on F Major (the dominant of B-flat Major, the key of the following section) on a high-register sonority. This sustained chord is followed by a registral shift to low instruments and a resolution to B-flat Major in the *Alla Marcia*. It is thus the moment’s high-register sonority, combined with the registral shift that occurs after the pause, that bears a similarity to the Credo motif.

The Ninth finale resembles the Credo most notably in its musical setting of “*Über Sternen muss er wohnen*” (“Over the stars he must dwell”; mm. 643-46), in that the long, ascending progression that accompanies these words reaches its climax on “*wohnen*” in m.646 on the very same E-flat chord of the Credo before dissipating quietly in the orchestra. In effect, this sonority assumes symbolic importance in relationship to the idea of a divine presence above the stars (Kinderman, 1985, p.115) just as it does in the Credo. This symbolic contrast in register, together with the ascending progression, occurs once more toward the end of the movement with the text “*über’m Sternenzelt muss ein lieber Vater wohnen*” (“a loving father must dwell above the canopy of stars”; mm. 749-62), so that the sonority is referenced three times as in the Credo.

⁴ Kinderman also notes on p.114 that the high chords later appear as tonic in the Benedictus, signaling the arrival of the divine messenger. A solo violin—rather than a solo vocalist—emerges from these sonorities, symbolizing the ideal quality of the divine presence.

Kinderman refers to these chords interchangeably as Beethoven's "symbol for the deity" for two reasons: first, the chords evoke a sense of heaven above the stars in tandem with religious texts (a quasi-religious text in Schiller's case); second, their threefold appearance is a reference to the Holy Trinity. Yet he emphasizes that these sonorities are ultimately not as evocative of God as they are of an image of the heavens above earth, which is underscored by the low, "earth-bound" registral shift that follows the high, ethereal chords in the music. He thus reads the referential sonorities in the Ninth's finale as a recurring musical symbol associated with the naturalistic realm that stands for the deity in all its wonder (Kinderman, 1985, p.118).

Daniel Chua, on the other hand, argues that religiosity in the choral finale is grounded in nineteenth-century theories of aesthetics combined with ideas of vocality and subjectivity. Chua notes that the nineteenth century was searching for a method of signification that could function as God. From the end of the eighteenth century onward, art came to stand for nature, and nature had replaced God as the interpreter of the cosmos as people began seeking a sign that could organize reality in harmony with the self (Chua, 1999, 167). The solution that philosophers came up with was that nothing (zero) signifies totality. Romantic philosophers and writers, including Schlegel, Tieck, and Hoffmann, sought to make instrumental music mean nothing so that it would mean everything and be all encompassing like divinity. They viewed zero to one as the move from nothing to divinity; for music to mean God and arouse an awareness of the eternal, they claimed that musical works must therefore come together to reconstitute the image of God. The Romantics thus juggled two absolutes in their discourses: that of "God" in terms of totality (i.e., the world) and that of "God" in terms of autonomy (i.e., the self) (Chua, 1999, 169). In this context, composers endeavor for works to come together to form the image of God as a totality.

The Romantics, however, knew that God could not be manufactured, and that a musical work is not the creation of a deity, but an "incarnational glimpse of the God within," as Chua (1999, p. 185) puts it, for music as God can only be discovered as a process already at work. Therefore, a musical work can imbue a subject with the potential for self-generation from nothing to the absolute poetry of humanity. This process resembles the notion of *Bildung*, a tradition that centered on self-improvement through culture and education and fostered a sense of common destiny for German speakers. Chua (1999) thus reads Beethoven's Ninth as a call to enter the process of self-knowledge: "[T]he symphony can discover the potential of its own genesis as a thematic being... where 'All men become brothers/Under the sway of joy's gentle wings'" (p. 188). According to Chua, the finale functions as the goal in the process of *Bildung* and this search for collectivity, which finds its voice *in the voice*. By the end of this progression, the listener is able to catch that fleeting glimpse of the divine.

The voice also plays a salient role for Wagner, who offers a differing view of religion in the Ninth. Having deemed himself the harbinger of the "music of the future," Wagner viewed the Choral Symphony as a revolution that paved the way for his music dramas. He argued that the finale breaks the boundaries of absolute music with the vocal enunciation of "Joy!," thereby signaling the death of instrumental music. In so doing, the Ninth points to a future in which the ineffable yearnings of absolute music will be redeemed by the certainty of the word, which is the true unifier of humanity (Chua, 1999, p. 224). Wagner states:

This *last symphony* of Beethoven's is the redemption of music out of its own element as a *universal art*. It is the *human* gospel of the art of the future. Beyond it there can be no *progress*, for there can follow on it immediately only the completed artwork of the future, *the universal drama*, to which Beethoven has forged for us the artistic key.

(Wagner as cited in Strunk, 1998, p. 1108, emphasis in original)

According to him, when the baritone soloist enters the last movement with "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!" ("Oh friends, not these tones!"; mm. 216-221), he is rejecting all that preceded his entrance (see Hinton, 1998, and Kramer, 1998 for differing interpretations of this moment). When the chorus cries out, "Joy!" it is therefore promising new "tones" for a new world: Wagner's "Artwork of the Future." Chua (1999) aptly articulates this:

In this way, the Ninth is no longer a symphony but the Utopian drama of modernity, breaking the bounds of tradition as it strives towards Elysium. The finale is therefore the “evangel” that prepares the way for the politics of music drama in a purely human society, in which absolute music and God are no longer necessary: the “mortal millions” shall become divine and Wagner shall furnish this new deity.... Wagner had to reach the Ninth as the completion of Utopia in song in order to justify his prophetic calling. The formal disintegration of the finale is the point of historical synthesis; the infinite and the definite coalesce in the finale as the primordial chaos of instrumental desire is harnessed by the *logos* of the human voice. (pp. 227, 256, emphasis in original)

In sum, Kinderman, Chua, and Wagner all suggest that the objective of Beethoven’s finale is not necessarily to perceive a great revelation of God. Rather, Beethoven sought to elevate the subject to a godlike consciousness—or beyond whatever lies above the “canopy of stars”—that is at once subjective and collective. For Wagner especially, this process was achieved when the Ninth dismantled the putative supremacy of instrumental music and transformed it into a divine consciousness through vocal music. But was instrumental music ready to be stripped of its significance in order to make way for a new music? Had it truly run its course already, as Wagner argued, just as scholarship traditionally claims that it had ascertained its primacy over vocal music?

3. Development: “Correcting the correction”

On October 28, 1853, Brahms’s mentor, Robert Schumann, published an essay in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* entitled “Neue Bahnen” (“New Paths”) heralding Brahms as the next musical messiah. Schumann praised Brahms for his potential to compose piano and choral music well but did not limit him to either genre. Rather, Schumann claimed that Brahms was destined to compose works of a greater magnitude: “Later, if he will wave with his magic wand to where massed forces, in chorus and orchestra, lend their strength, there lie before us still more wondrous glimpses into the secrets of the spirit world” (Schumann as cited in Weiss & Taruskin, 1984, p. 362). It is possible that Schumann was suggesting with the phrase “in chorus and orchestra” that Brahms would one day compose a worthy successor to Beethoven’s Ninth. When Brahms completed Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 over two decades and numerous compositions later, historical narratives decreed it a successful counterpart to Beethoven’s final symphony.⁵ The finale of Brahms’s First recalls that of the Ninth in the context in which the main themes appear: after a long, quest-like progression “from darkness to light,” both emerge as themes of transcendence at the beginning of their respective finales. Figure 1 demonstrates that his main theme also alludes to that of Beethoven’s in its step-wise motion, range, orchestration, texture, and most notably, its implicitly lyrical qualities.

a.

Allegro non troppo ma con brio

violins

The image shows a musical score for violins, consisting of three staves. The tempo is marked "Allegro non troppo ma con brio". The first staff is marked "poco f" and the second "sfz >". The third staff has a trill "tr" marking. The music is in C major and 4/4 time, featuring a step-wise melodic line with some chromaticism and a trill at the end.

⁵ Between 1853 and 1871, Brahms experimented with several genres before finally committing to write his first symphony. His major works during these years were mostly choral pieces, including *Rinaldo*, *Ein deutsches Requiem*, the *Alto Rhapsody*, the *Shicksalslied*, the *Triumphlied*, the two serenades for orchestra, the Piano Quintet in F Minor Op.34, and his first piano concerto.



Figure 1: Comparison of the main theme from Brahms's Symphony No. 1 Finale (a) and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" theme (b)

Brahms was capable of writing a distinctive main theme, yet he deliberately chose to evoke Beethoven's Ninth. Bonds (1996) suggests that the very prominence of the finale similarities could have stemmed from contemporary theories of originality and have reflected the "anxiety of influence" that loomed over the heads of 19th-century composers after Beethoven's death.⁶ According to him, Brahms could "overcome [his predecessor] only by confronting directly those works that were the principal sources of his anxiety" (p. 2).

Lawrence Kramer (2011), on the other hand, argues that the theory of influence is an overstated and inadequate one that misrepresents ordinary intertextual relations, for it denigrates the composer and his artistic integrity at the expense of creating a dramatic "hero" narrative of individuation (p. 114). Influence, rather, should be viewed as a formative element in a composer's style since a predecessor's cultural impact is simply part of the musical language; that is, influence is part and parcel of cultural transmission. Instead, Kramer asserts that a work may also "contest, extend, correct, sublimate, sublimate, transcribe, adapt, literalize, metaphorize, generically transpose, affiliate with, disaffiliate from, deconstruct, satirize, idealize, or debunk an antecedent work" (p. 119). Brahms decides to meet the challenge of Beethoven's Ninth head-on by "misreading it": he openly alludes to it but then swerves away.

Brahms accomplishes this change in trajectory through several intriguing ways. To begin, Brahms's divergence from the Beethovenian model can be traced to his treatment of the principle theme. Although the melody's initial appearance evokes the same aura of transcendence as Beethoven's Freude ("Joy") theme does, its transcendent quality proves to be ephemeral. The theme is adumbrated in the opening measures of the finale's slow introduction: it appears in mm.1-3 in the upper violins and horns, and again in mm. 12-14 with the addition of violas. It is intoned in the parallel minor mode, however, for Brahms is restoring the negative tone that began the symphony, just as Beethoven does with the dissonant trumpet fanfare at the start of his finale. The overt allusion to the Freude theme is announced in mm. 61-77 in the noble-sounding C major—the key that is meant to alert us that tragic conflict has reached resolution. In mm. 77-93, the first "variation" begins insofar as the orchestration and texture are altered: The theme is transferred from the strings to the winds with string accompaniment, and the dynamics shift from *forte* to *piano*.

In m. 94, the main theme is subjected to motivic manipulation as a *tutti* statement. In m. 106 the melody undergoes further transformation until it gives way to the alphorn call in m. 114. The listener discovers, with this progression, that Brahms has not only given up on the theme of transcendence but also on the possibility that this will be a set of variations on the theme. Instead, remnants of the main theme are incorporated into other melodic fragments throughout the finale (see Figure 2).

⁶ Not all scholars believe that nineteenth-century composers felt the weight of the world on their shoulders in Beethoven's shadow. There is reason to believe, however, that Brahms felt increased pressure than other contemporary composers over earning his fame, precisely because at age 20 he was "appointed" to fill the stature that Schumann's article had bestowed upon him.

The figure displays a musical score with several measures highlighted and numbered in boxes. Measure 62 is marked *mf*. Measure 95 is marked *f*. Measure 244 is marked *mf* and is attributed to flute and oboe. Measure 268 is marked *ff*. Measure 274 is marked *ff*. Measure 279 is marked *ff marc.*. Measure 375 is marked *p marc.* and *sf*. Measure 285 is marked *ff* and *p dim.*. Arrows indicate the flow of the main theme's variation and its absorption into other melodic fragments across these measures.

Figure 2: Variation of the main theme and its absorption into other melodic fragments

The lyrical theme reappears at m. 186 as transitory material leading to the development section. It begins in the home key of C major, then transforms rhythmically and harmonically until it yields to the alhorn call at m. 285. After several measures of wandering diminished chords, the melody is substituted by a climactic build-up to the *tutti* statement of the chorale in mm. 407-416. The fact that the main motif loses its identity in the process of “variation,” and that it is also substituted first by the horn call and later again by the chorale, is a significant one. Brahms is displacing the Beethoven paraphrase from any substantial role in the movement; by having the main theme of his finale allude to Beethoven’s without giving it the same function, Brahms is therefore asserting his altered standpoint (Brinkmann, 1995, p. 36).

The principle melody is further undermined by the fact that it competes with other themes throughout the movement. Before the “Joy” paraphrase begins, the majestic alhorn call (Figure 3a) emerges above *pianissimo* string tremolos in the first horn in the *Più Andante* section (m. 30) of the introduction. The alhorn call is the focal point of the *Adagio* introduction; in fact, one can hear it signifying an epiphany within the context of the overall symphony. As Raymond Knapp (1997) has observed, the theme can be likened to the baritone entrance, “O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!” in the Ninth finale (p. 10).

Upon initial analysis, the melody strongly represents “nature,” for the horn is traditionally associated with nature in Western history. Indeed, it is a well-known anecdote that the melody came to Brahms while vacationing in the mountains of Switzerland in 1868 (Brodbeck, 1997a, p. 14).⁷ After the initial alhorn quote, he transfers the theme to the flute in mm.38-46 in its high register to underscore its transcendent quality, just as Beethoven did with the Freude theme (see mm.164- 187 of the Ninth Symphony finale).

The alhorn call is interrupted shortly thereafter in m. 47 by the chorale-like cadential formula that is intoned by the trombones, horns, and bassoons (Figure 3b). This chorale is, in turn, interrupted by the alhorn call in m. 52. Only now, after formulating an “opposition world” through the two formal elements of nature and religion, does the main *Allegro* section appear with its communal song theme in C major (Brinkmann, 1995, p.36). Here, the main theme is once again subjected to motivic elaboration that transforms it twice into the alhorn call, which is overtaken by the chorale a second time (m. 407).

⁷ Brahms quoted the alhorn theme, which he heard being blown by an alhorn player one morning, on a postcard to Clara Schumann as a birthday greeting with the following original inscription: “Thus blew the alhorn today: High up on the mountains, deep in the valley, I send you many thousands of greetings.”

a.

horns in C

b.

Figure 3a: The alphorn call, mm.30-38

Figure 3b: The chorale theme followed by the resumption of the alphorn theme, mm.47-54

The main theme is therefore sublated by both the alphorn and the chorale themes because it does not reappear in any overtly recognizable form from the middle of the movement onward. In contrast, the motivic material of Beethoven's *Freude* melody is clearly heard from beginning to end, although it, too, has been subjected to variation. Reinhold Brinkmann (1995) sums it up:

The alphorn call transcends an adaptation of a Beethovenian theme, quelling it, effacing it. And the result is that, in the coda stretta, where all the preparation leaves one expecting a third, now triumphal appearance of this historically fraught theme, the adaptation is reduced to a simple intensifying figure, and the chorale replaces it for good." (p. 40)

In establishing and then abandoning the analogy with Beethoven's theme, Brahms is thus setting a different trajectory from that of the Ninth.

Brahms also "misreads" Beethoven's finale in his stylistic treatment of the main theme. According to Bonds (1996), all three themes in Brahms's finale represent the composite range of sources for song: the alphorn is representative of the *Volk*, affirmed by the folk-like associations reflected in Brahms's postcard message; the main theme symbolizes bourgeois society; and the instrumental chorale represents the church (p. 163). As Bonds notes, Beethoven also synthesizes a variety of vocal types in his finale (the Lied, the opera, and the sacred song) as variations on a theme. Brahms, however, makes a similar gesture towards synthesis but allows the individual themes to remain intact (notwithstanding the disintegration of the main theme) without resorting to the voice, so that "lyricism is introduced largely to be abandoned" (Bonds, 1996, p. 163). The musical themes possess the ability to realize lyrical "absolutism" by turning to the voice, yet none reach apotheosis due to a sequence of interruptions. Although vocal allusions in instrumental music became a widespread practice dating back to at least Schubert (see Parmer, 1995, p. 163), and eventually one that became a Brahmsian convention over time (e.g., the two song quotations in his G-Major Violin Sonata, the lullaby quotation in his Second Symphony), there is nonetheless a difference between a work with text and

one that suggests vocality or approaches the status of program music—the two works in question exemplifying this distinction. Since there existed a precedent for songfulness in instrumental works, perhaps Brahms’s pre-empting of the lyrical and suppression of vocality is not so much a reaction to Beethoven’s Ninth as it is a stylistic by-product.

Instead, I maintain that the most striking way in which Brahms deviates from his predecessor is through the finale’s formal structure. As Table 1 demonstrates, the finale itself is in Type 2 sonata form; that is, the recapitulation does not occur with a statement of the primary theme but later. The main theme heralds the exposition in m.62 and goes on to serve as transitory material in m. 186: it acts as a “grand consequent” to the “grand antecedent” of the first theme, sounding like a repeated exposition while actually leading to the development section. As it turns out, it is Brahms’s practice to bring back a primary theme as the transition in an exposition.⁸ These transitions tend to “dissolve” in his music, which explains the non-return of the song-like allegro theme in the recapitulation.⁹ Instead, our expectations are thwarted as the chorale, absent since the finale introduction, resounds forcefully in m. 407.

Table 1: Formal outline of Brahms’s symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, movement IV

Form	Introduction (Adagio)	(Più Andante)	(transition)	Exposition (Allegro non troppo, ma con brio)		
Theme	Head motif: <i>saltus duriusculus</i> paraphrase	Alphorn call	Chorale	Alphorn call	Main theme	Second theme and closing material
Measure	1	30	47	52	62	119
Key	C minor	C major	→FM	V/ CM	CM	GM→EM

Form	(False exposition repeat)	Development	Recapitulation	Coda	
Theme	Main theme as transitory material	...	Alphorn call	Second theme and closing material	<i>Saltus duriusculus</i> fragment at m. 392, chorale at m. 407
Measure	186	...	285	302	392
Key	CM	Various (modulations)	CM	CM + Cm then modulations	CM→FM→CM

I argue that rather than the main theme symbolizing bourgeois society, as Bonds suggests, it is the formal structure of the sonata itself that is bourgeois, since composers/ theorists had lauded and codified its technique during the early Classical era with the works of Haydn and Mozart serving as exemplars. The chorale, in its final statement, thus happens outside sonata space. Having fulfilled this mandate with a sonata form, the music at last breaks free with the chorale, punctuating and disrupting the musical process, thereby extricating itself from the Beethovenian model.

But why does the chorale, with its inherently religious associations, get the last word in this symphony? Why not a different melody or an altogether differing gesture? What is more, Brahms could have opted to unify the entire symphony by bringing back in the recapitulation or coda the rising chromatic motif—Wagnerian in its *Tristan*-like quote (see Fink, 1993, p. 80)—that opens the first movement and appears at the end of both the second and third movements. His decision not to points toward a deeper consideration.

⁸ Brahms practices this convention in the G-minor Piano Quartet, the Piano Quintet, the A-major Piano Quartet, the A-major Violin Sonata, the D-minor Violin Sonata, and the Second Symphony (movements 1 and 4).

⁹ Precursors to this practice include: 18th-century quartets; Chopin’s second and third piano sonatas; the finale of Schumann’s Second Symphony, which strongly influenced Brahms; and the last movements of Brahms’s own D-minor Violin Sonata and Clarinet Trio.

4. Recapitulation: Deciphering the chorale

By the nineteenth century, the chorale—the epitome of Protestant music—came to symbolize a revered religious, communal, and musical heritage (see Stanley, 1987). In the context of the First Symphony, what precisely is the chorale conveying: a traditional sense of religiosity, a communal feeling, or something else? According to Brodbeck (1997b), the returning hymn (Figure 4) represents a “transcendence that Brahms cannot finally embrace” (p. 78).

Figure 4: The climactic return of the chorale in the coda

This hymn is precisely what distinguishes Brahms’s overall work from its prototype, which embraces the concepts of joy and brotherhood. In other words, Brahms is projecting a pessimistic outlook through the return of the chorale in order to seal his divergence from Beethoven. Given the emotional turmoil that disheartened Brahms by 1876—most notably the 1856 death of his mentor, Robert Schumann, the death of Brahms’s mother in 1865, and his complicated relationship with Clara Schumann after enduring years of an Oedipal love triangle with the Schumanns—Brodbeck’s theory is plausible. Yet how can we phenomenologically explain the triumphantly intoned chorale in the coda? The fact that Brahms wanted to draw our attention to this moment is further underscored in the chorale’s rhythmic contour, for it is the only passage in the finale that is composed homorhythmically. This salient detail of treating the chorales in two differing manners also makes it difficult to justify the idea that both chorales connote religion.

Brahms was raised in a traditional North German Lutheran household. Although his friends recall that he did not attend church as an adult, he maintained an interest in religious texts throughout his life; in that sense, he was more of a religious thinker than a practitioner (Beller-McKenna, 2004, p. 35). He was also known for quoting various scriptures in detail and citing God as his greatest compositional inspiration. In fact, Brahms revealed to Arthur M. Abell in the fall of 1896 that the C Major theme was inspired specifically by John 14:10 from the Bible: “Believe thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that

dwelleth in me, he doeth the works” (as cited in [Abell, 1955, p. 32](#)). Last, his passion for writing sacred pieces was reflected in his vast choral/vocal music output. This context allows us to hear the first chorale in m. 47 as both a moment of religiosity and a personal reflection on the musical and religious past. The score affirms this idea, for the hymn is intoned quietly in four voices (the traditional setting of chorales): it is distributed and doubled among the bassoons, contrabassoon, horns, and the trombones with their strong religious associations (note the scoring of *three* trombones, whereas all the other instruments are orchestrated in pairs). To an extent, this religious allusion can also be interpreted as a “return of the repressed.” In other words, by incorporating religious elements into the finale, Brahms was unwilling to disavow the influence of sacred music, which had been repressed both in the symphony and in the alleged ascendancy of instrumental music over vocal music.

The second chorale, on the other hand, is boldly intoned in the coda, unlike a modest hymn that is meant to evoke introversion. This chorale can be interpreted phenomenologically as a powerful statement of instrumental music attempting to reclaim its place as the rightful conduit to the realm of the metaphysical through the pure acoustical surface of the music. In having the chorale appear twice in its entirety—the first time channeled through the powerful sound of brass instruments, and the second time as a stronger declamation from the entire orchestra—Brahms seems to be insisting upon the need to reinstate the instrumental core of the symphonic tradition. Indeed, the chorale is the one constant in this finale of a symphony that has been about struggle and transformation; it is the only theme whose melody remains unchanged. In fact, it is expanded through orchestration and dynamics. Even the alhorn call undergoes a change in the sense that the main melody is eventually absorbed into it. In this respect, the chorale’s persistence earns it the right to have “the last word” in the symphony. In sum, the most important observation we can make is that the chorale loses its religious and vocal associations to the sheer sonic power of its instrumental presentation so that the chorale paradoxically reaches its apotheosis through instruments. The acoustical surface of the music ultimately trumps all.

Matthew Gelbart, however, discourages viewing the chorale as a figure of timeless religion. First, Brahms was practically a humanist agnostic; second, the evocation of older musical techniques—the chorale in this context—holds a deeper, didactic meaning for Brahms ([Gelbart, 2009, p.69](#)). To begin, he argues that all three melodies are geographic allusions to distinct German-speaking regions (the main theme is associated with the Austrian Southeast, the alhorn call the idyllic Alpine Southwest, and the chorale the North German tradition) that represent for Brahms a greater German Volk during a time when Viennese Liberal sentiments were high, and the symphony became a symbol of pan-German cultural achievement ([Gelbart, 2009, see pp.65-68](#)). Uniting them in a single movement therefore became an “omnivorous gesture of cultural nation building” ([Gelbart, 2009, p. 69](#)).

However, he also maintains that the chorale serves a greater purpose knowing that Brahms rigorously studied numerous chorales and chorale settings of the Renaissance masters through J.S. Bach; indeed, chorales were, for Brahms, part of a progressive history of style and technique ([Gelbart, 2009, p. 69](#)). As Brahms grappled with etching out a place for himself in history while acknowledging the nature and progression of the genre, he also sought to synthesize different historical and stylistic elements in this work—the justification being that the symphony is the all-encompassing German genre ([Gelbart, 2009, p.71](#)). The finale’s three symbolic themes therefore present a historical tapestry of musical styles, beginning with the most modern artistic development (the main theme) and ending with the earliest: the chorale, whose orchestration of three trombones intoning root-position chords are evocative of late Renaissance music ([Gelbart, 2009, p. 71](#)). Therein lies the significance of the chorale and the probable reason for eschewing not just the return of the lyrical theme but also cyclical form. Brahms even caps off his early music reference by closing with a post-cadential plagal cadence—a common cadence in 15th and 16th century polyphonic music (also known as the “Amen cadence” because it is sung at the end of Protestant hymns)—in mm.448-57.

Extending Gelbart’s compelling thesis, I argue that the chorale takes on simultaneous meanings within the finale, enabling it to operate on several hermeneutic axes. I maintain that the axial “pivot” that allows for this nexus between chorale as religious art/art religion and the chorale as compositional work/music history is the four-note motif that begins the finale. It appears that Brahms’s “Joy” paraphrase can be traced to his study of Bach’s ostinato chorus “Ach, Herr! Lehre uns bedenken,” from his funeral cantata *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* BWV 106, the *Actus tragicus* ([Brodbeck, 1997, p.232](#)). David Lee Brodbeck ([1997b](#)) points out that the first four notes of Brahms’s introduction outline the

saltus duriusculus figure, a rhetorical compositional technique utilized by Bach and his predecessors as a traditional mourning topos. It is also related to the ground bass in Bach’s chorus (Brodbeck, 1997b, p. 232). Figure 5 demonstrates how Brahms quotes the *saltus duriusculus* within his slow introduction.



Figure 5: The *saltus duriusculus* in Bach’s funeral cantata *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* BWV 106, the *Actus tragicus* (a) and its comparison with Brahms’s introduction, mm. 1-3 (b)

This introductory material is the seed from which the main theme grows, in the parallel key of C Major, before wilting to dissolution. The chorale can also be traced to the harmonic progression of the *saltus duriusculus*, for its cadential pattern is echoed in the contrabassoon, cellos (in the second chorale), and bass trombone (see mm. 48-50 and mm. 411-414). Beginning in m. 391 of the coda, Brahms briefly quotes the mourning topos once more via rhythmic variation as it melds with a diminished chord—a feature of the alphorn call that was previously intoned in the developmental transition of the recapitulation (mm. 285-88)—that the woodwind and brass sustain (Figure 6). The *saltus duriusculus* thus functions as a threefold hermeneutic connective tissue: it affirms the chorale as a symbol of sacredness via the cantata; it alludes to the Prussian North, one of three regions comprising a greater German folk musical culture, vis-à-vis Bach; and it supports the representation of the chorale as real compositional work at an earlier point in history (Gelbart, 2009, p. 70).



Figure 6: Integration of the *saltus duriusculus*/main theme fragment with the alphorn call’s harmony in the finale coda

5. Coda

To Wagner and his followers, the Ninth represented the death knell of instrumental music. The implications of this gesture were so great that after Beethoven's death there was reason to believe that there was nothing further to be gained from the symphonic genre since it had "run its course." During this time, it is likely that Brahms did not suffer so much from the anxiety of influence itself but from, in Lawrence Kramer's (2011) words, "the mirage of the influence concept that demands he be Beethoven's heir" (p. 126). "Mirage" or otherwise, Brahms nevertheless approached his first symphony with much deference and calculation—its gestational period attaining a near legendary status—knowing that it would be met with scrutiny. His long-awaited First Symphony thus stands as a metaphor for the historical necessity of confronting Beethoven in the realm of the symphony to move beyond him (Bonds, 1996, p. 174).

This article has explored how Brahms alludes to the Ninth in his finale and then abandons the analogy through several ways, giving the initial impression of "negating" the turn Beethoven had taken. Yet upon deeper analysis, to state that Brahms "corrects" Beethoven's work through his own symphony seems histrionic. Brahms sought to retell music history while defending the symphony's legitimacy; therefore, to deny Beethoven's influence or "efface" the Ninth would be to deny the history of the symphony. Rather, Brahms reverently acknowledges his predecessor through his stirring lyrical theme, but also on a subtler, grander scale in his synthesis of the three symbolic themes that invoke folk nature *within history*, much as Beethoven did in synthesizing the Lied-like Freude theme organically with high art (Gelbart, 2009, p. 64). As Gelbart (2009) notes:

He could not do away with Beethoven and did not wish to,
but he could relegate him to a time and a physical place in
history and reach beyond and around him both geographically
(in the regional connotations of his symbolic themes) and
chronologically, showing Beethoven's own supposed organic roots. (p. 71)

Most important, in subverting listener expectations by presenting the chorale *last* rather than reprising the uplifting C Major theme, thereby eschewing the return of the three-note Wagnerian motif, and by extension, cyclical form, Brahms gives early music the "final word" in his retelling of music styles. In effect, he proves, as Gelbart (2009) states, that "other, earlier greats could stand as the climax as well—or even, in this case, *instead of Beethoven*" (p. 71). This gesture also demonstrates that Brahms could shape the trajectory of the symphony without relying upon Wagnerian language or techniques.

Grappling with hermeneutical meanings in music is a complex and subjective undertaking. It is also a timeless one, a case in point being the two composers that this article has dealt with, for Brahms encountered the same problem that scholars do today in trying to unravel meanings in Beethoven's Ninth. This mystery, in turn, may have potentially influenced how Brahms conceived his own semiotic dimensions in his First Symphony. Moreover, no matter how hard Brahms tried to resist the weighty pull of the Ninth, he faced the same difficulties as Beethoven did in transfiguring religion in a secular work while striving to refine his compositional style and inscribe his name into the symphonic genre. In that respect, the First Symphony's dramatic narrative of *per aspera ad astra* equally serves as a metaphor for understanding Beethoven's music as much as it is a metaphor for coming to terms with Beethoven himself, and then moving beyond him with the future of the symphony.

Peeling away at the intricate inner layers of a musical work—its historical context, motivation, underlying compositional processes, philosophical/ political underpinnings, and hermeneutical meanings—is a rewarding endeavor. This study has provided insight into but a few of these layers, revealing the calculated processes and motives behind the arresting finale of Brahms's titanic first symphony—a symphony that was shaped in myriad ways by the precedent of Beethoven's Ninth. Shifting from the narrow lens of academic research outward to consider the "bigger picture" of music as an overall aesthetic experience (i.e., the overarching value of examining any work in general in great depth), this study also offers implications for the classical musician and the average classical music enthusiast alike.

From a performative standpoint, this examination informs the musician's playing and allows him to make artistic and interpretative choices in order to authentically realize Brahms's score.

Approaching the work aesthetically as a listener, let us begin with the premise that music can exert a powerful, transcendent hold upon us. It allows us to communicate the unspeakable and unknowable to ourselves and to others, presently and across centuries. In effect, it enables the listener to experience time as a tangible object—one that imparts meaning and pleasure. Lawrence Kramer (2007) encapsulates this phenomenon:

The works of music that become familiar and beloved assume a distinct personality, in a sense that goes beyond the metaphorical. We take these pieces into our lives, we think and talk about them.... We animate them, inspire them, as we do with our favorite fictional characters and the anthropomorphized things with which we populate our world. We develop an intimacy with them that is as much a kind of companionship as a kind of understanding. (p. 40)

Western classical music fosters this intimacy through the elements of melody and form, for melody derives its power from the expressive force of the human voice (Kramer, 2007, 40). As Kramer (2007) explains: “The classical ‘work’ simulates a personality by dramatizing, through the fate of the melody, how that personality came to be. The music tells its own life story” (p. 40). A captivating melody—one that repeats, develops, disappears, and reappears within the parameters of form—draws us into dramatic scenarios that often mirror our own emotional zeniths and nadirs, losses and recoveries, and other telling moments. The fate of a melody therefore becomes intertwined with our own fate as the music unfolds. As a result, the music demands that we know it again, and know it better upon repeated listenings; in so doing we know ourselves better, too (Kramer, 2007, 42). In effect, this study heightens and deepens our understanding of the dynamic melodic journey undertaken in the finale of Brahms’s First Symphony. It informs our hearing of the symphony as a whole and engages us in the dramatic fate of an unforgettable melody that remains long after the music has ended. In echoing Kramer, to know Brahms’s First Symphony better is to know ourselves better, too, as we hear our own pathos and exaltations come to a climax and denouement in its finale.

In closing, I offer a brief musing—a post-cadential cadence of sorts. The *saltus duriusculus*, characterized by dissonances through leaps, translates from the Latin into “a little hard leap”; translated a step further given its religious context: the proverbial “leap of faith.” This motif, which begins and concludes the finale of Brahms’s First Symphony, transcends its contrapuntal function as part of a work that has been about struggle, and, on an overarching scale, about taking compositional chances within a traditional language and genre whose very viability had been challenged in the post-Beethoven era. Embodying his own borrowed rhetorical device, Brahms took a calculated leap of faith with his first symphony; in doing so, he was able to restore faith in the modern symphony and validate his place in the Western music canon.

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