



## An analysis of the Composing Techniques of Brahms's Piano Quartet Op.25 and Op.26

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### ABSTRACT

The two piano quartets Op. 25 and Op. 26 were created when Brahms's personal style was approaching his first maturity. Both works were written in 1861 and published in 1863. Although these two works were created in pairs at short intervals, Op. 26 was more exquisite and mature than Op. 25. The contrast between the two works are the focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** Brahms, Piano Quartet, Composing Technique, Music Analysis.

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### 1. Introduction

Brahms was a special German composer during the Romantic music period. He composed a large number of music works, and plenty kinds of music. Classical music and Baroque music influenced his lifetime creation, that's not hard to understand Brahms has unbreakable emotions to classical music.

Brahms' loyalty to pure music was extremely rare at the time. His contemporaries almost kept the program music flag flying, especially Liszt and Wagner (Ulrich, 1966, p. 300). However, Brahms never composed program music like Symphonic poem, and still kept classical consciousness and music form (Baron, 1998, p. 346). The way Brahms insisted on created a special genre and had an inestimable impact on the development of Romantic music.

Among all Brahms's music works, the most commendable music is his chamber music works (Notley, 2004, p. 242; Pascall, 1975, p. 697). Both of Op. 25 and Op. 26 were composed in 1861, and 2 years later Brahms published them. These two works were created in pairs at short intervals, and many critics and musicians were kept a watchful eye on them. Brahms collaborated with Hellmesberger Quartet to perform these two works (Notley, 2004, p. 242). These two works caught the public's eye in Vienna. It was as a chamber music player and composer that he introduced himself to the Viennese music world (Notley, 2004, p. 242; Notley, 2004, p. 242). Brahms got many fans and ignited the public's

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passion for chamber music. These two works were praised and strongly supported by Hanslick, who made the piano quartet became influenced in the history of music.

## 2. Literature review

Actually, Brahms always been a hot spot in the international musicology. Since Arnold Schoenberg published his paper *Brahms the Progressive*, many scholars paid great attention to this paper, and made a new evaluation of Brahms's status in music history. Nowadays, they thought Brahms made a great innovation and as important as Wagner's achievements. They are both important to the 20th century.

After collecting data, I found plenty of literature about Brahms's chamber music, which can be said pretty fruitful, and a considerable number of monographs and journals have been published.

Studies show that Brahms composed 24 chamber music works during his lifetime, can be divide into three different periods (Mason, 1950; Pascall, 1975). His chamber music Op.25 and Op.26 all composed around the middle of the 1800s, during that time composers tried to find a new way to express their music ideas. Program music and nationalist musicians boomed at that time, but Brahms and César Franck were two rare musicians who neither promoted program music nor nationalism.

Through the comparative analysis of these two works, we can summarize the composing techniques that Brahms was good at. At the same time refined his personal style. Through these essential two works during Brahms' transformation, we can explore the mature process of his composing techniques and style, which is more objective and direct than the empty general discussion. In addition, we can also see how the genre of chamber music reached a new height with the effort of Brahms.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 The movement arrangement

In both two piano quartets, Brahms used the sonata form in the first movement. He retained the tradition of classical music for the most part, but also extend the structure of the form. The biggest difference between these two works is the arrangement of the second and third movements. The second movement is often slow, the third should be Scherzo. However, Brahms gave the second movement a new name "Intermezzo" in Op. 25 (Example 1). Intermezzo and Scherzo both can be found in his chamber music works. In Op. 26, the second movement is slow and third is Scherzo. Actually, Scherzo movements in his chamber works are more like, dance music in Haydn's music works, included custom elements; movements Brahms deliberately used the "Intermezzo" to name which inherited Beethoven's Scherzo style, the second movement of Op. 25 is a typical example (Mason, 1950, p. 30). The form of the second movement in Op. 26 is rondo, rondo includes scherzo elements in it. Though Brahms added some fresh ideas in it, he also arranged it as a ternary form, and retained the composition tradition of the classical period.

The form of Op. 25 and Op. 26 (Example 1)

	Op. 25	Op. 26
1st movement	Allegro The sonata form	Allegro The sonata form
2nd movement	Intermezzo Allegro The ternary form	Poco Adagio The rondo form
3rd movement	Andante con moto The single trilogy form	Scherzo Poco Allegro The ternary form
Final movement	Rondo alla Zingarese Presto The rondo form	Allegro The sonata-rondo form

Traditionally, the rondo form often be used in the final movement. Brahms didn't extend the last movement of Op. 25 into the complete sonata-rondo form, the Scherzo elements gave this movement a new life (Example 2). In his Op. 26, when he repeated the first group, he even shortened

the length of it and changed the order of different themes when they appeared (Example 3). The way to state the theme and form, is creative.

The structure of final movement of Op. 25 (Example 2)

Theme A			Theme B			Theme A'		Theme C	
a	b	a	c	d	c	a	e	f	e'
1	31	61	80	92	104	116	155	161	167
30	60	79	91	103	115	154	160	166	172
g	g	g	B <sup>b</sup> -g	g	B <sup>b</sup> -g	g	G	g	G
Theme D				Theme B'		Theme C'			
g	g	h	g'	c	d	c	e	f	e'
173	181	189	198	223	235	247	255	261	267
180	188	197	222	234	246	254	260	266	272
e-b/B	B	e	b/B	G-e	e	G	G	G	G
Theme A''			Development			Coda			
b									
273			311			380			
310			379			422			
g			e-f <sup>#</sup> -g			g			

The structure of final movement of Op. 26 (Example 3)

Exposition	Theme 1-----trans-----Theme 2----Closing Theme-----Coda----Theme 1					
	1-60	61-105	106-142	143-194	195-204	205-242
	A-E-c <sup>#</sup> -E-A	a-e-G-F-C	E	C-E-C	A	A-c <sup>#</sup> -E-a
Development	243-311					
	C-c-C-d-e-a-D-d-a-D-a-B <sup>b</sup> -a					
Recapitulation	trans-----Theme 2---Closing Theme-----Coda					
	312-345	346-382	383-434	435-519		
	a-B <sup>b</sup> -F	A	F-A	A-D-A-D-A		

Therefore, Brahms retained the framework of classical music and do the extension at the same time. That can improve the power and inflection of these two works.

### 3.2 Theme construction

From the beginning of Op. 25, we can find the technique of reflection and transposition here. We can find it everywhere in this work, he established a big theme by the change and development of a short motif (Example 4). Stephen E. Hefling (2004) edited a book named Nineteenth Century Chamber Music, in his book he mentioned: Although the first of these, the G Minor Piano Quartet, proved successful with audiences, features of the opening Allegro had made it controversial among his friends. Joachim believed that the first group had an excess of full cadences and, together with Clara Schumann, considered the D major of the second group to last proportionally too long (p. 250).

Example 4.

Beginning of Op.25      Sequence: F-A-E<sup>b</sup>-D → C-G-B<sup>b</sup>-A

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of Op. 25. It features three variations of a motif, each enclosed in a red box. The first box is labeled 'Origin' and shows the motif in G minor (F-A-E<sup>b</sup>-D). The second box is labeled 'Reflection' and shows the motif in D major (C-G-B<sup>b</sup>-A). The third box is labeled 'Transposition' and shows the motif in C major (C-G-B<sup>b</sup>-A). The score includes piano dynamics and an 'espress.' marking.

Though it also has some flaws in it, Op. 25 laid the first stone for Op. 26. In Op. 26, the length of the first group equaled to the second group. He avoided the embarrassing situation that the length of the second group is twofold than the first group in Op. 25 (Example 5).

Example 5.

Exposition of 1 <sup>st</sup> movement of Op. 25 (Example 5)	Theme 1—Trans.—Theme 2—Closing Theme—Theme 1
	1-27   28-52   53-94   95-113   114-123
	A-b-D   D-E   E-B-e-E   E-A   A

In the second movement of Op. 26, at the beginning of the violin, there is a technique like an echo, it can develop the melody just by 2 notes (Example 6). Though Brahms didn't use echo to establish a huge theme in this movement, it still throughout the whole work, and pushed the development of the movement.

Example 6.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement of Op. 26**

In the first movement of Op. 26, the ascending eighth notes in the first motif echoed with the cello and condensed the rhythm into triplets (Example 7). It's very clear and brief, included second and third intervals. These intervals, duplets, and triplets provided good materials for the development of the melody.

Example 7.

**The First Motif in the Exposition of the 1<sup>st</sup> Movement of Op. 26**

**The cello**

This shows us that in his works, the development of music is mostly completed by the transformation of the music theme. This way makes the music constantly changing, but still connected. By comparing these two quartets, it's obvious that techniques used in Op. 26 are more mature and concise than 25.

### 3.3 Variation development

Both of these two quartets are sonata form in the first movement. The function of exposition is presenting the music theme, so he concerned mostly about it. Variation development is often used in this part. The exposition in the first movement of Op. 25 is a typical example: in measure 1 there is an ascending second. After that appeared a descending second twice times. In this theme, second intervals played an important role. These melodies are composed of quarter notes. Without the disturb of rhythm, these second intervals can attract the audience's attention. If you look at these second intervals, there are a lot of repetitions and sequences of the second degree (Example 8).

Example 8.

Exposition of 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Op. 25

Theme 2 began from measure 50, Brahms arranged the second degree in every measure, and used an inversive sequence to make audience connected to theme 1. He related two themes by the second interval, not just variation. From the character, these two themes are different, the rhythm of theme 1 is simple more and more boring; theme 2 is more complex and vivid. Op. 25 is the early work that Brahms experimented with variation development (Example 9).

Example 9.

Theme 2 in 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Op.25

Inversive Sequence: D-C<sup>♯</sup>-D-A → F-A-E<sup>♭</sup>-D

The exposition of the first movement from Op. 26 began from the piano solo. Theme 1 composed of four measures piano solo and four measures cello solo. The four measures piano solo included two motifs, one included quarter notes and triplets, second and third intervals; another included quarter and quaver notes, fourth and second intervals. The cello solo composed by quaver notes and triplets, it seemed like extending from the piano part of the motif (Example 10).

Example 10.

Theme 2 began from the piano. It's a new motif and different from theme 1 because Brahms added grace notes to this motif. In theme 2 there is an obvious fourth interval, which made people remember the second motif in theme 1. The sequence G<sup>♯</sup>-A-C<sup>♯</sup>-B and B-C<sup>♯</sup>-E-D<sup>♯</sup> are equal to the sequence B-C<sup>♯</sup>-E-D in theme 1 (Example 11). And the cello part of theme 2, did an inversive sequence of

the first motif in theme 1(Example 12). From measure 57, there is a special rhythm. After three measures continuations, restored to the eighth notes, and it is the main form of the second motif in theme 1(Example 13). Brahms related theme 1 and theme 2 through the rhythm and sequence.

Example 11.

Second motif of Theme 1 in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Op. 26

Sequence: B-C<sup>#</sup>-E-D → G-A-C<sup>#</sup>-B → B-C<sup>#</sup>-E-D<sup>#</sup>

Theme 2 of the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Op. 26

Example 12.

The First Motif of Theme 1 in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Op.26

The Cello Part of Theme 2 in the Exposition

Example 13.

These two piano quartets can find the exploration of this composition technique. Op. 26 is also the first work of Brahms to use the development variation maturely.

### 3.4 Metrical displacement

Brahms had a strong sense of the history among all 19th century composers and had a deep love with Renaissance music. His early music experimented with this elastic tempo. In his Op. 45, 54, 55 we can find many rhythms across bars.

Beethoven and Schumann directly influenced Brahms's composition. Beethoven explored rhythms across bars, but in his work, it just appeared a short time. Schumann went further based on Beethoven's. These two musicians provided important foreshadowing for Brahms's creation.

In the second movement of Op. 25, there are many rhythms across bars combined by a quarter-note and quaver-note (Example 14). After that, the rhythm went back to regular rhythms. In Gypsy music is very common to use this kind of rhythm, and that can break the regular strong and weak to push the development of music.

Example 14.

The musical score for Example 14 consists of two systems. The first system shows the Violin and Viola parts. The Violin part starts with a *p* dynamic and includes a *dim.* marking. The Viola part also starts with a *p* dynamic and includes a *dim.* marking. The second system continues the Violin and Viola parts, with the Violin part marked *p* and *sempre dim.*, and the Viola part marked *p* and *sempre dim.*. The key signature has one flat and the time signature is 2/4.

In the first movement of Op. 26, from measure 103 we can find the meter signature is 3/4 time, but the rhythm from the string in measure 104 indicated the quality of 2/4 time. After the rhythm across bars in measure 106-107, the quality of music returned to 3/4 time. At the same time, the melody of the cello still kept the rhythm of 3/4 time, but the harmony kept pace with the violin, it's 2/4 time. The long note G appeared on the third beat in measure 106, though the G is on the weak beat, it appeared a new motif. The quality of music returned to 2/4 time in measure 108 from the third beat. Brahms used the rhythm across bars again to break the regular strong and weak. The way he used to treat the rhythm became one of his important techniques (Example 15).

Example 15.

1<sup>st</sup> Movement of Op. 26

The musical score for the 1<sup>st</sup> Movement of Op. 26 shows three systems of staves for Violin, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature has three sharps and the time signature is 3/4. Red arrows indicate meter changes: from 2/4 time at measure 104, to 3/4 time at measure 106, and back to 2/4 time at measure 108. The Violin part includes a *p* dynamic. The Viola and Violoncello parts feature triplet markings (3) throughout. The score demonstrates the complex rhythmic interplay between the instruments.

### 3.5 Folk song elements

From Op. 25, we can find tones and melodies that have the character of German folk songs. The triads and chords lead the audience's thoughts to singers on the Rhine boat (Mason, 1950, p. 22). The intensely personal style is closely related to what he learned from German and Austrian music tradition. Besides, the Gypsy music style in the final movement also pushed people's emotions to the climax, it also became Brahms's distinctive style (Mason, 1950, p. 32).

In Op. 26, the first time when we listen to the final movement may feel boring. The theme of this rondo reappeared 6 times and can feel obvious folk songs (Example 16). In this movement, Brahms omitted a note from the common chord and became a Brahms style motif. From measure 4, the special chord repeated three measures. It's unique.

Example 16.

#### Final movement of Op. 26

The image displays a musical score for the final movement of Op. 26, piano. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has four measures. The second system starts at measure 5 and has six measures. A red box highlights the first two measures of the second system, showing a unique chord structure where the second degree of the scale is omitted in the bass line.

### 4. Conclusion

Therefore, from Brahms's composition, we can find some of his composition features: absolute music composition and development variations. During the Romantic period, derived many new genres, like the symphonic poem, often based on the sonata form and composers had the freedom to do some special treatment. Liszt and Wagner supported program music, but Brahms rejected it. He insisted on absolute music that made people think he was a conservative composer and overlooked his creation.

It is because his music didn't have a clear story or literary text, and the unique rhythm and melody made the audience associated the music with some humorous music images and gave the audience more space to understand the music, extend the possibility of the music characterize.

From the two quartets of Brahms, we can find that the works started from a simple music material, then developed the original material and added new materials. The construction of music themes also greatly affected the development of various parts and even the entire movement. This method is more like scrap-basket. This way made the music more logical and has great potential for development.

The Op. 25 and Op. 26 appeared in pairs. From the perspective of creative techniques, musical language, and others, such features can be found: One work is the basis for the success of the second work, and the second work is the development and improvement of the first work. From Op. 26, it can be found that Brahms has a more precise grasp of the theme and the length. The development variation method with his characteristics is also more mature and comprehensive in this work. It is said that from the beginning of Op. 26, Brahms's personal style and creative techniques have been more obvious, which is also an important work before he entered the first maturity period.



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