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**The Effectiveness of Teaching the Character Pieces of Johannes Brahms to
Advanced Piano Students**

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Introduction

For centuries, the piano music of the German Romantic composer Johannes Brahms (May 7, 1833 – April 3, 1897) has been celebrated by players both in the teaching studio and on the concert stage. Brahms' place among the greatest composers in history is widely accepted and his piano music represents an important part of the modern concert repertoire. Brahms' ability to infuse old musical forms with his own unique style and sound make his music attractive and distinctive. For piano teachers of advanced students, the music of Brahms offers a wide array of techniques and developmental opportunities for learning. Because of their complexity and accessible length, the character pieces of Brahms make excellent teaching pieces for developing certain key aspects of students' technical and musical skills. Piano teachers should use the character pieces of Johannes Brahms to improve student abilities at the instrument with regard to texture management, voicing and balance, sound quality and control, melodic shaping and contour, and advanced character development and interpretation. Developing a firm understanding of how to teach these pieces effectively will not only allow students to play Brahms' music confidently and effectively, but also allow them to develop important aspects of their playing.

Brahms' piano music is known for its often thick textures. Because of this, teaching Brahms' character pieces will help students understand these textures, discerning which voices are in the foreground and which voices need to be in the background. Furthermore, managing these thick textures will help students prioritize melodic content with greater musicality and confidence. Once students are able to prioritize melodic content, the music of Brahms will help them learn to shape and contour

these complex melodies. These skills will, in turn, assist students as they continue onto other types of repertoire in the advanced levels of study.

An additional and significant technical development fostered through playing Brahms is the production of healthy sound and controlling sound quality at the piano. When playing Brahms, it is crucial for students to play loud passages with rich, full sound and soft passages with a warm, singing tone. Teaching students the proper technical and music approach to sound production would work well in the Brahms character pieces, and would prepare them for similar repertoire in future levels of study. Finally, the abstract quality of Brahms' character pieces forces students to think very carefully about their interpretation, since Brahms rarely offers a descriptive title or programmatic association in the character pieces. This increased level of interpretive challenge will increase artistic conviction in students' performances.

The goal of this research project is to show that teaching the character pieces of Brahms to advancing piano students will improve their ability to manage textures, voice and balance musical material, control the quality of their sound, shape and contour melodies, and interpret complex characters and emotions. For advancing piano students, these pieces can greatly assist in technical and musical development and prepare students for even more advanced repertoire at the concert level. By knowing the important developmental aspects of teaching the Brahms character pieces, teachers can properly prepare students for studying Brahms and ensure that their experiences with his music are fruitful. By carefully considering the context, compositional make-up, and musical intent of each of the character pieces, teachers can help their students become confident and capable artists on the concert stage.

About Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany. His father, Johann Jakob, worked as a freelance musician on many stages in Hamburg, while his mother, Christiane, worked as a seamstress. Johannes began music lessons early in life, with the encouragement of his father, and eventually began working as a musician in Hamburg. Brahms quickly outgrew his first music teacher and eventually began working with Eduard Marxsen, who would help pioneer the young boy's music education as he became a prolific composer. While Brahms became a proficient pianist in his younger years, his study of theory and composition, facilitated by Marxsen, would quickly take over. Eduard Marxsen was well-acquainted with the German musical tradition, which included composers like J.S. Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert. Concerning Brahms' early compositional instruction, Jan Swafford indicates,

Marxsen made sure Johannes knew these composers exhaustively and founded everything he composed on their example. At the same time the boy was allowed room to find his own voice, what Marxsen called "new accents" on the eternal patterns of musical language. By age eighteen, with the first works he allowed to survive, Brahms possessed something that cannot be taught: a musical voice audibly grounded in tradition and at the same time unlike any other ever heard.¹

Brahms would continue studying the traditions of music, looking to older styles as inspiration and practice. Early in his career, Brahms launched himself into a full study of counterpoint in an effort to master the art of contrapuntal writing.² This extensive study can be seen throughout his compositions, including his piano works. Brahms eventually moved to Vienna, where he celebrated a thriving career as a composer. Brahms passed away on April 3, 1897.

¹Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 26.

²*Ibid.*, 156.

During Brahms' career as a composer and musician, the world of music was changing rapidly. With Vienna as his home for most of his significant musical career, Brahms found himself in the midst of many musical changes. All of Brahms' music fits into what most musicologists agree is the Romantic era of music; however, toward the end of the nineteenth century, many composers began challenging the role of music in society and the philosophies that drive music forward. In Vienna, Richard Wagner rose as the leader of the "New German School," which also included Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz, seeking to create new genres and forms while advancing music's integration with other art forms. Meanwhile Brahms, who spearheaded the reactionary group against the "New German School," looked to the past traditions, using established forms realized in the Romantic idiom. According to Burkholder, "the dispute polarized around Brahms and Wagner and around the dichotomies between absolute and program music, between tradition and innovation, and between classical genres and forms and new ones."³ Indeed as Burkholder mentions, 'absolute' music, or the idea the music can stand alone and needs no outside association, would be a trope that would appear throughout Brahms' compositional career.

Brahms used his education and training in the fields of musicology and historical composition from Eduard Marxsen to assist himself with adopting these old forms. Brahms' ability to adapt older forms to his unique compositional style is a trait he became quite known for. About Brahms' place in music history Burkholder writes,

He was among the first to view the entire range of music of the present and past as material to draw upon in composing his own new and highly individual music – a stance we see repeatedly in composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By introducing new elements into traditional forms and trying to meet

³J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Calude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 8th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 726.

the master composers on their own ground, he was arguably pursuing a more difficult course than those who simply made their mark through innovation.⁴

Although Brahms drew heavily upon older forms and traditions, it was his ability to put his personal voice into each one of his compositions that made his music so interesting and engaging. Brahms' unique compositional style translates into some important key features. Kirby notes that some of Brahms most notable characteristics in his piano compositions are textural complexity through chords and doublings, melodic complexity through chords and doublings of thirds and sixths, and rhythmic intricacy by use of hemiola and written in accelerandos and ritardandos.⁵ Gordon further adds that Brahms' music is full of intricate counterpoint, exhibiting his devotion to the contrapuntal craft early in life.⁶ These traits and others give Brahms' music its unique quality, and are realized and nuanced differently throughout his compositional career, especially in his piano music.

Modern musicology divides Brahms' compositional output into three main areas. Each of these areas emphasizes the aforementioned compositional traits in different ways and provides clues to Brahms' development as a composer. Edwin Evans divides the periods of Brahms' piano music into the following three areas: the Early or Symphonic Period (1853 – 1856), the Middle or Technical Period (1861 – 1866), and the Late or Contemplative Period (1879 – 1880; 1892 – 1893).⁷ During the Symphonic Period

⁴Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, 734.

⁵F.E. Kirby, *Music for Piano: A Short History* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 1995), 231.

⁶Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature: Music for the Piano and Its Forerunners*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 332.

⁷Edwin Evans, *Handbook to the Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms* (London: William Reeves, 1936), 24-5.

Brahms composed all of the piano sonatas in his output and a few character pieces before moving to the Technical Period, which contains all of the variation sets for piano. The Contemplative Period contains the bulk of Brahms' character pieces for piano, arguably his most notable works for piano. Although Brahms was able to maintain his unique voice throughout his compositional career, he certainly grew in his abilities as a composer throughout each period of composition and allowed his skills to culminate with each period of music. Because of this growth and culmination, the character pieces from the Late Period receive special attention; in them, Brahms poured his entire compositional craft from decades of study.

The genre of the character piece developed during the Romantic era as composers and musicians began experimenting with new mediums for music composition and performance. Burkholder defines a character pieces as a composition that “depicts or suggests a mood, personality, or scene, usually indicated in its title.”⁸ Brahms' character pieces, however, are problematic in relation to this definition due to his position as a proponent of absolute music. Cai notes that the character pieces of Brahms are not typical because of their systematic avoidance of extra-musical associations.⁹ Though they are atypical within the genre of character pieces, they are extraordinary works that deserve the attention of performers and teachers. The character pieces of Brahms, particularly the pieces from the latter half of his life, represent a culmination of the master composer's skills and his devotion to music.

⁸Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, 604.

⁹Camilla Cai, “Brahms' Short, Late Piano Pieces – Opus Numbers 116-119: A Source Study, an Analysis and Performance Practice” (PhD diss., Boston University, 1986) 273, accessed September 21st, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Johannes Brahms' education and formal training in composition and music history provided a profound influence on his compositional career. As Brahms worked and experimented as a composer, he looked back to old forms and reinvented them with his own voice. Throughout his compositional career, Brahms composed in a variety of forms, but his character pieces are among his most beloved works for piano. Although Brahms' character pieces are unusual in their relationship to character pieces from other composers, they represent a culmination of Brahms' compositional abilities and are now regarded as some of his finest compositions for piano.

Pedagogical Significance of the Character Pieces

Since the late 19th century, audiences have enjoyed the piano music of Johannes Brahms in the concert hall. The character pieces in particular are favorites of the classical music concert-goers. Listeners are attracted to his Classical structures reinvented within the Romantic idiom, aspects that are especially noticeable in the character pieces.¹⁰ Brahms' delightful lyricism, complex textures, and passionate sense of drama are not only likable to audiences, but to performers as well. Performers of Brahms' piano music know well his unique figurations and idiosyncrasies at the instrument, and they are often drawn to it, making his music quite popular among performers. While appealing to performers and audience members on the concert stage, the pedagogical implications of Brahms' piano music, specifically the character pieces, are substantial, and thus merit a place in the teaching studio. Teaching the character pieces of Brahms develops several

¹⁰Brahms was known to combine forms from the Classical era of music, such as sonata form and theme and variation, with aspects of music from the Romantic era, such as more chromatic harmonies and complex rhythms.

important aspects of piano technique and can be integrated in many important ways into a student's curriculum.

The character pieces, especially from the late period, “hold a secure place among the greatest keyboard literature.”¹¹ Pedagogically, the character pieces of Brahms are quite advanced and therefore should be carefully assigned to students. Jane Magrath writes, “Almost all of Brahms’ music is for mature pianists with accomplished technique and advanced musicianship.”¹² Using the Magrath system found in *The Pianist’s Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature*, the most accessible of the character pieces are levels nine and ten – the most advanced levels of the scale.¹³ The level of musical and technical complexity does not, however, diminish the importance of the character pieces in the teaching studio, but instead increases the need for greater understanding of the music, including how to level, sequence, and assign them to students.

Brahms’ character pieces are remarkably diverse and versatile for use in the studio. For study and performance they can be used singularly or as a set of pieces. Because the character pieces tend to be shorter in length, it seems logical for some students to work on more than one. Conversely, since pieces are quite dense in terms of texture, form, and compositional complexity, assigning only one of them to a student provides ample opportunity to delve into the various intricacies of the music. The

¹¹Jane Magrath, *The Pianist’s Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing, 1995), 128.

¹²Ibid.

¹³The Magrath system is a leveling system used in modern American piano pedagogy to approximate the difficulty of intermediate teaching literature. The system spans 1 through 10, ranking literature from the late elementary to the early advanced stages of learning.

character pieces also work well as either recital pieces or study pieces. Any of the works from the character piece genre would be effective in performance and would undoubtedly refine a student's performance skills in a number of ways. If having one of the pieces as only a study piece (not being polished and performed) works more effectively, students will still grow in an understanding of Brahms' unique approach to composition and their pianistic abilities. Whether played individually, as a set, polished and performed, or only studied in lessons, the character pieces of Johannes Brahms are remarkably adaptable and suitable in the canon of advanced teaching repertoire.

While the versatility of the character pieces is notable, and a considerable advantage when considering the teaching repertoire, the benefits for musical and pianistic development in advanced students are even more substantial. By carefully studying and playing the Brahms character pieces, students will develop a sense of texture management, improved sound quality and control at the instrument, more refined voicing and balancing skills, a better sense of melodic shape and contour, and more advanced interpretation and development of mood and character.

The "Brahmsian texture" is known for its fullness, exploiting the middle and lower registers of the keyboard through full chords and melodic doublings of thirds and sixths.¹⁴ For pianists, this requires special attention to keep the texture becoming too 'muddy' and overwhelming the melody. Managing a thick texture is not a skill that is unique to Brahms' music; however, it is a common element found in his character pieces, therefore making them ideal teaching pieces for students needing improvement in this area. The thick textures and compositional intricacies of the character pieces also work

¹⁴Kirby, *Music for Piano*, 231.

over a period of time to improve a student's sound quality and control at the instrument. Careful consideration in texture management and melodic voicing give ample teaching opportunity to talk about tone color and its relationship to arm weight. With the many layers of sound in a typical Brahms character piece, careful control over the sound and layers is essential to add dimension to the piece.

In addition to managing thick textures and controlling one's sound, voicing and balance also require special attention in Brahms' piano music. Brahms was known as an exceptional writer of two-part counterpoint, and this is evidenced in many sections of the character pieces.¹⁵ Careful study of the score, both in lessons and in practice, will reveal areas in need of special voicing in order to highlight this exquisite counterpoint. Carefully studying these voicings with students will, in turn, improve their ability to locate and skillfully voice melodies within a complex texture. Students will also develop their ability to shape and contour the melodies found in the character pieces. It is noted that the melodies found in Brahms' piano music tend to be irregular in terms of structure and length.¹⁶ While this certainly makes the music more engaging, it poses a certain level of difficulty in shaping these melodies. Embracing the challenge and finding creative, organic ways to shape these melodies will allow students to find new ways to express their ideas in the music.

Adding to the technical and musical developments already mentioned, further benefits are found in the complex characters and moods of the character pieces. Overall,

¹⁵Konrad Wolf, "Brahms," from *Masters of the Keyboard: Individual Style Elements in the Piano Music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms*, enlarged edition, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 263-64.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 279.

the character pieces are more abstract, intentionally avoiding virtuosic displays and concrete connections to descriptive titles or other works of art. Regarding Brahms' intent behind the character pieces, Kirby writes that Brahms was "looking backward, avoiding both the literary connections and the brilliance that had been exploited by Liszt and others" and that he wanted to return "to something more disciplined and sober."¹⁷ The abstract nature of the character pieces means that tackling the interpretive characters is a less straightforward task. This interpretive challenge pushes students and players to think outside surface emotions and look deep in the music for the complex characters within.

The character pieces of Brahms are dense with compositional intricacies, but are versatile for use in the studio, whether for study or performance. From texture management and sound control to the shaping of irregular melodies and development of complex character, the challenges and benefits of teaching these pieces are substantial. Developing a deeper understanding of these intricacies and benefits will equip teachers and players to incorporate this exquisite music into their teaching.

Texture Management

One of the landmark traits of Brahms' piano music is his use of texture. Typically these textures are more rhythmically complex, tend to have doublings of thirds and sixths, and are situated in the mid- to lower register of the keyboard. For numerous pianists, managing this texture and making it aurally understandable can be daunting tasks; however, by developing an understanding of Brahms' intent behind these textures

¹⁷Kirby, *Music for Piano*, 240.

and by using specific teaching and practice strategies, these thick, complex textures become more manageable.

Brahms' intent behind his textural writing is supported by some significant scholarship. As a performer, Brahms was historically known for being 'heavy-handed' at the piano. His passagework in the bass region of the keyboard was usually quite loud and passionate; historians have accounted for this in Brahms' performances. In one encounter, Jan Swafford records Clara Schumann listening to young Brahms at the piano. "Once she came indoors thinking someone was playing four-hand duets and discovered Brahms alone at the piano, his hands flashing all over the keyboard. He loved drawing great handfuls of sound from the instrument."¹⁸ Players of Brahms are certainly familiar with his affection for "great handfuls of sound" in the form of thick textures.

Though debated in performance practice musicology, one must also consider a difference between the modern piano and the piano Brahms preferred to play and use to compose. According to Camilla Cai, Brahms preferred a more conservative-style, "Viennese" instrument as opposed to a more progressive instrument, like the one used in concert halls today. Concerning the more traditional instrument of Brahms, Cai writes, "In all ranges its sound is quiet but well-defined. The three main ranges — bass, middle, and treble — have distinct timbres, and, as the volume increases, those timbres change quite significantly. These features contrast markedly with the prized evenness of timbre on a modern piano."¹⁹ Brahms' concept of color within different ranges of the piano

¹⁸Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 80.

¹⁹Camilla Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works," *Performance Practice Review* 2, No.1 (Spring 1989): 60.

Although some of the claims made by Cai were later contested by Augustus Arnone, they still speak to Brahms' familiarity with conservative instruments and thus require attention in this document.

explains his use of different registers. The bass register on these more conservative pianos was known for a lighter, clearer sound. That, combined with the ‘booming’ bass of many Brahms pieces would lead to a different soundscape than many modern pianists are used to. Knowing this, pianists should focus on not allowing the bass of Brahms’ pieces to become too muddy because it is likely that Brahms did not hear it this way. Furthermore, the middle register of the 19th century piano had a very distinct tone, making Brahms’ ‘tenor melodies’ more expressive and beautiful. The difference of timbre in the middle register also makes the tenor melodies easier to bring out of the thick texture.²⁰ For example, in the B section of the Capriccio in D minor, Op. 116, No. 7, Brahms writes a melody situated in the ‘tenor’ register of the piano (see example 1). With the arpeggiated figures in the bass and soprano voices, one can imagine how Brahms is taking advantage of the different timbral qualities of the registers.



Example 1. Capriccio in D Minor, Op. 116, No. 7, mm. 21-30. Tenor melody surrounded by bass and soprano arpeggiations.

When teaching these character pieces, teachers may find it helpful to familiarize students with the sounds of a traditional instrument. This will help students aurally perceive the

²⁰Cai, “Brahms’s Pianos,” 63.

difference in the various registers of the piano and strengthen their interpretation of Brahms' textures in his writing. Whether Brahms actually intended for these character pieces to be played on a traditional piano or a modern piano, understanding how Brahms may have conceptualized the differences between the various registers of the piano aids in understanding his textures.

As Brahms progressed through his life and compositional career, he became somewhat of a reactionary against the "New German School" of music. One way in which he did this was by avoiding the overt use of pianistic virtuosity in his music. Instead of exhibiting virtuosic 'flair' as seen in the music of Chopin and Liszt, Brahms intended a more orchestral sound for his music. Edwin Evans even classifies Brahms' first period of composition as the 'Symphonic Period' because of the nature of his piano writing.²¹ Michael Musgrave refers to the Scherzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 4, and the Ballades, Op.10, from the first period as especially orchestral in texture.²² The middle section of the Ballade in D Minor, Op. 10, No. 1, works especially well as an orchestral texture because of its full chords, use of many registers, and the careful pacing required to create a satisfying climax to the section (see example 2).

²¹Evans, *The Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms*, 24.

²²Michael Musgrave, *The Music of Brahms* (Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1985), 16.



Example 2. Ballade in D Minor, Op. 10, No. 1, mm. 27-33. Layers of sound and texture create a symphonic texture.

Helping students hear Brahms' music with a full, orchestral sound will help them bring richness to their tone without becoming overly harsh. Hearing certain sections symphonically will also open up more gradations of dynamic control and color within the thick textures of many of the character pieces.

Managing the often thick, intricate textures of Brahms involves understanding the differences in color Brahms may have heard in the piano's registers and conceptualizing the music in a symphonic manner. Introducing students to the sound of a 19th century piano through recordings, or having them play one if it is available, is an effective way to introduce them to the differences in register on the piano. Once they become aware of these differences, having them transfer the aural concept back to the modern instrument is important. Additionally, familiarizing students with the symphonic qualities of Brahms' piano music will help with the texture management: frequent doublings, full chords, and counterpoint between layers of sound. It may be helpful to have students listen to Brahms' orchestral music, such the Symphonies, Concerti, or *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, so

they can gain awareness of how Brahms orchestrates and writes for the symphony. Taking these steps will add greater dimension to the study and performance of the character pieces and will make the sections or pieces with full textures seem less daunting and more exciting.²³

Voicing and Balance

Managing and controlling the thick textures in Brahms' music is not enough to make it musical and engaging; proper voicing and balance are also essential to creating a solid artistic interpretation. According to Stephen Thomas, one of the essential aspects of playing Brahms is "layering the sound through careful balance and attention to inner melodies," so it requires special attention on the part of the pianist.²⁴ Because of numerous examples of this in the character pieces, they are ideal for developing more refined balancing and voicing skills in students and advancing pianists.

Before knowing *how* to voice a line or melody, one must first know *what* to voice. Finding the melodic priority can be challenging in Brahms' music, especially in thicker textures. Brahms often hides inner melodies within the music, which creates interest or changes the meaning of other melodies in the texture. One strategy for managing voicing and balance is to consider differences in register. As previously mentioned by Camilla Cai, Brahms may have used, or at least considered, a more traditional instrument in his

²³While there are many excellent examples of Brahms' symphonic style, students may enjoy listening to the fourth movement of the Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98, or the first movement of the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15, to become acquainted with his style.

²⁴Stephen Thomas, "Interpreting Brahms: Practical and Historical Perspectives," in *The Pianist's Craft: Mastering the Works of Great Composers* ed. Richard Paul Anderson (Landham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 119.

compositional process. Knowing that Brahms considered the middle register of the piano rich and the bass register lighter than a modern piano can allow pianists to make more informed decisions concerning balance.²⁵ For example, a passage taken from the Intermezzo in B minor, Op. 119, No. 1, shows three distinct layers of sound. Hearing the soprano, tenor, and bass registers of this example gives more dimension and allows the listener to hear the soprano line, tenor melody, and bass line without the texture becoming too muddy (see example 3).



Example 3. Intermezzo in B minor, Op. 119, No. 1, mm. 37-42. Different registers of the piano and tenor voice with up-stem.

Another challenge when playing the piano music of Brahms is found in his use of inner melodies. This poses difficulty because not only are pianists responsible for finding these melodies, but also for voicing them in relation to the texture. Stephen Thomas writes the following concerning these inner melodies:

A somewhat less obvious issue in playing Brahms is the matter of bringing out inner voices that are not merely part of the vertical chord structure but also part of independent voices that require a clear presence. Careful score study is necessary for discovering where the significant individual lines are located and the degree to which they are to be brought out. Brahms frequently infused his piano pieces with imitative counterpoint and important countermelodies that can easily be overlooked if the pianist isn't thinking 'horizontally' enough.²⁶

²⁵Cai, "Brahms's Pianos," 63.

²⁶Thomas, "Interpreting Brahms," 120.

One strategy for finding inner melodies to bring out is to look at the stemming, as Brahms often used stemming to indicate an inner voice. This can be seen in the tenor voice of example 3 above where Brahms places an up-stem on the left hand notes that are part of the countermelody. Another example of this can be found in the Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2. At measure 65 of the middle section, Brahms again provides additional stemming to some of the left hand notes to indicate a countermelody to the soprano part (see example 4).



Example 4. Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2, mm. 63-71. Additional stemming in the left hand indicates a countermelody to be brought out.

As mentioned by Thomas, careful score study and listening on the part of teacher and student will ensure that these melodies are recognized and heard.

An additional issue with voicing occurs when considering the two-part counterpoint that frequently occurs in Brahms' music. Brahms often writes his bass lines and soprano lines together so they help one another make sense. According to Konrad Wolf, when studying the melody lines of Brahms, "the melody frequently becomes

understandable only when one simultaneously studies the bass line.”²⁷ In the Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3, the opening melody line makes more sense when studied with the bass, which implies the harmonic progression of the main melody (see example 5).

Teachers could easily have a student isolate those two lines in lesson and practice. In turn, this exercise will preserve shape and character, allow the melodic material to be properly voiced, and keep the balance between the hands more appropriate.



Example 5. Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3, mm. 15-24. The bass line and soprano line work together to form complimentary two-part counterpoint.

When working on voicing and balance in these character pieces, certain techniques can be useful in teaching and practice. Techniques that isolate the material needing to be voiced are perhaps the most practical. For example, having a student play only the melody without the accompanimental figures helps develop a clear aural concept of the important melodic material. In cases where the soprano and bass lines of a passage

²⁷Wolf, “Brahms,” 264.

form two-part counterpoint, isolating those two voices and studying their interaction will ensure that they are balanced and logically shaped once they are reintegrated with the texture. Students may also take well to singing the important material both in lesson and in practice, which will help give the melodic content more natural shape.

Voicing and balance are integral skills to properly executing the piano music of Brahms. Identifying the material that needs to be voiced is of critical importance. By considering the different coloristic possibilities of the piano's registers, one can discern where the important melodic material can be found. Looking for cues in the score, such as stemming, can also help identify melodic material. Considering the two-part counterpoint of the soprano and bass can also help with balance and voicing. When teaching these techniques, it is important to isolate these factors both in the lesson and in practice. Doing so through demonstration and critical feedback will ensure that the student is hearing the proper material, unlocking limitless possibilities of sound and artistry in musical interpretation.

Sound Quality and Control

As students of the piano advance in their technical abilities and artistry at the instrument, control of sound becomes increasingly important. Although teaching healthy technique and sound production should begin with the very first lesson, the various nuances of sound quality become exponentially more complex as students enter the advanced realm of study. The character pieces of Brahms pose a special challenge in terms of sound control and quality. The thick textures and complex layers of voicing have already been discussed, but it is especially important that students execute these various

aspects of the music while maintaining a tone that is appropriate for the pieces. Admirers and listeners of Brahms' piano music are familiar with a kind of 'Brahms sound' at the instrument – one that is rich and full, bringing out the various layers of polyphony, but never harsh or assaulting to the ear. Having advancing pianists play the character pieces of Brahms will make them more attuned to the quality of their sound and its effect on the listener in performance.

Wolf regards Brahms' unique sound as one of the composer's contributions to the instrument.²⁸ Overall the ideal sound in Brahms is characterized by warmth and roundness. This quality is especially prominent in the slower sections where a soft, 'wispy' sound must be avoided. In faster sections, it is important to convey the power and drama of the music, while avoiding an abrasive or sharp tone. In order to develop this fullness, it is helpful to think of a symphonic quality while playing. Both Edwin Evans and Michael Musgrave attest to the symphonic nature of Brahms piano music, particularly the earlier pieces.^{29,30} While thinking of the symphonic sound is helpful for texture management (mentioned earlier in this document), it is also an excellent way to achieve an ideal sound for Brahms. For slower sections, it may be helpful to 'orchestrate' the piano music by mentally assigning certain instruments or sets of instruments to different layers of the music. This technique ensures that the integrity of the polyphony is maintained as a warmer sound is developed. In faster, more dramatic sections, imagining

²⁸Wolf, "Brahms," 250.

²⁹Evans, *Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms*, 24.

³⁰Musgrave, *Music of Brahms*, 16.

the fullness of an orchestra while playing will bring more openness and roundness to the sound, preventing a harsh touch.

There are numerous examples within the character pieces where sound control is essential. The opening section of the Rhapsody in B minor, Op. 79, No. 1 provides a special challenge for controlling sound. The thick chords, extended range of the piano, and presence of polyphonic lines make this section prone to being too loud or too harsh (see example 6). Augustus Arnone suggests layering each line in order of priority, thus allowing the sound to be more “penetrable.” In doing this, Arnone asserts that “the pianist can minimize the build-up of sound and allow everything to be more easily heard.”³¹ Employing what Arnone calls “hierarchization of layers” is crucial for sound control throughout the character pieces of Brahms including the Rhapsody in B minor. When teaching this piece, it may be helpful to have students play each layer of sound independently, listening carefully for the appropriate sound in each voice. Once students can successfully achieve their desired sound quality for each layer, they can slowly put the layers back together while preserving their original concept of sound.

³¹Augustus Arnone, “The Aesthetics of Textural Ambiguity: Brahms and the Changing Piano,” *Current Musicology* 82, (Fall 2006): 18.

Agitato.

Example 6: Rhapsody in B minor, Op. 79, No. 1, mm. 1-13. Multiple layers of sound in this fast passage require careful control of sound.

Issues of sound quality and control require attention in slower, more lyrical pieces as well. As previously discussed, conserving the fullness of sound while playing lyrically is of utmost importance. An example of this can be seen in the Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 76, No. 6. When playing this piece, one must shape the main melody while also keeping focus in the inner triplets and bass to preserve the rhythmic interplay of the voices (see example 7). Arnone’s suggestion of sound layering would also work in this intermezzo – prioritizing the main melody, bass, and inner voices, respectively. Students might enjoy ‘orchestrating’ this piece in order to hear each line more distinctly. Perhaps a student hears the main melody as a clarinet and the inner voices as a group of cellos and

violas. However the student chooses to conceptualize each layer, the integrity of each line must be conserved while honoring the composer’s marking, “*Sanft bewegt*,” or “gently moving.”



Example 7: Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 76, No. 6, mm. 1-9. The multiple layers of sound necessitate careful sound control.

Developing the Brahms tone in students takes careful instruction on the part of the teacher. In his article on teaching Brahms, Stephan Thomas urges teachers to use lots of high quality demonstration and listening in the lesson so that students can develop an aural perception of the Brahms tone.³² Teachers could opt to play multiple high-quality recordings of the same piece or demonstrate themselves in the lesson. Crucial to developing a student’s aural perception of the Brahms tone is having the student match the sound they hear; making this comparison will help strengthen the student’s connection from the hand to the ear.

³²Thomas, “Interpreting Brahms,” 119.

In order to develop the ‘Brahms tone’ at the instrument, teachers must carefully monitor their student’s technical development. Creating rich, warm sounds at the instrument must be done in a way that is free of tension and does not inhibit the flow of the music. When striving for the ‘Brahms tone,’ students may be inclined to produce a harsh, rigid sound. Teachers should make sure that students are playing with a relaxed and free wrist while maintaining firmness in the key. Students who struggle with shoulder, chest, or upper back tension may have to work on relaxing those muscles as well.³³ Tension at the instrument will typically manifest itself in a strident or shrill sound, which is to be avoided in Brahms. Carefully monitoring a student’s technical approach to the instrument will ensure they are playing in a free and relaxed manner, granting them openness and fullness of sound.

Developing a concept of healthy tone production and sound control at the piano is extremely important for advanced students. Studying the character pieces of Brahms will encourage students to think critically about not only the quality of their sound in playing, but also how they are producing it. By thinking in terms of symphonic writing and even mentally orchestrating sections of their music, pianists can begin conceptualizing sounds that are appropriate for Brahms. Careful monitoring of technique by the student and teacher will ensure healthy execution of sound and reduction of tension. Thoughtful consideration of sound will then expand the coloristic and artistic possibilities of advancing pianists.

³³Ibid., 120.

Melodic Shaping and Contour

When considering the most notable aspects of Brahms' music, listeners inevitably notice Brahms' melodic content. Categorizing great melodies or melodists of the past can be complicated, as a firm definition of a 'great melody' cannot be formulated; however, it has been noted by scholars and performers, like Musgrave and Wolf, that the melodies in Brahms music are deserving of attention and represent a unique contribution to the field of music composition. Understanding the importance of Brahms' melodies will help teachers and students grasp how to better understand and interpret his music.

There are a number of aspects that make the melodies of Brahms stand out among his contemporaries. Brahms' melodies are unique because they draw upon several sources for their inspiration and are employed in the music in creative and interesting ways. First, Brahms' melodies are typically quite long, requiring intention from the performer to produce natural shape and contour.³⁴ Typically, it is helpful to think of singing the melodies in order to maximize the shape and musicality; however, Brahms occasionally writes melodies that would be quite difficult to sing in one breath. An example of this can be found in the B section of the Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3. The opening two phrases of this section are quite long and would require detailed practice to create a sensible shape over the arpeggiated left hand (see example 8). In order to create strong direction in the longer lines, it would be helpful to mark a clear arrival point in the score and practice a musical arrival to and departure from the climax. Having these structural elements in place gives a clearer intent and helps lengthy melodies not sound motionless.

³⁴Wolf, "Brahms," 270.

Example 8. Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3, mm. 41-50. The long melody in the RH deserves special attention for proper shape.

In addition to their occasionally lengthy nature, Brahms' melodies are sometimes drawn from, or at least influenced by, his love of folk music. The folk influence of his melodies is manifested as irregular phrase lengths within the music and the thematic material chosen by Brahms, as indicated by Musgrave and Evans, respectively.^{35,36} An example of phrase irregularity can be found in the Intermezzo in B-flat Major, Op. 76, No. 4. Though it is clear where the melody starts and ends, the lengths of the melody are varied. The various lengths combined with the dotted-eighth rhythm work together to create a folk-style melody (see example 9). Playing this opening section with the idea of a folk melody would also help deliver the lively but gracious effect the composer desires (*Allegretto grazioso*).

³⁵Musgrave, *Music of Brahms*, 9.

³⁶Evans, *Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms*, 26.



Example 9. Intermezzo in B-flat Major, Op. 76, No. 4, mm. 1-9. The rhythm and phrasing of the melody evoke a folk style.

Though Brahms writes melodies inspired by folk music, he occasionally quotes it directly. In the Intermezzo in E-flat Major, Op. 117, No. 1, Brahms sets the following text from Johann Gottfried von Herder:

Schlaf sanft mein Kind, schalf sanft und schön!
 Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn.

One can see in the opening line of the intermezzo that the German text fits perfectly with the main melody, found in the alto voice (see example 10). This fascinating connection would be helpful for students and teachers alike to use in practice. Knowing the text and how it fits with the phrasing Brahms provided will create the desired shape and inflection of the opening section.



Example 10. Intermezzo in E-flat Major, Op. 117, No. 1, mm. 1-4. The Herder poem matches the phrasing and shape of the melody.

Another important aspect of Brahms' melodies relates to counterpoint. Brahms' expertise as a contrapuntalist helps integrate his melodies with the rest of the music in a deeper way. As already mentioned, Brahms frequently crafted the relationship between the main melody and the bass line as two-part counterpoint, thus creating a more cohesive sound in the music.³⁷ While the G minor Ballade, Op. 118, No. 3, has already been cited as an example of this, another example of two-part melodic interaction can be found in the Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 76, No. 7. While the right hand melody has shape and intention on its own, the contour of the left hand assists the character of the right hand (see example 11). For this to be understood it would be helpful to have a student play each hand separately, shaping each hand as if it were the melody, and then putting them back together again. Emphasis should be placed on giving *shape* to each line so the two parts can be heard as counterpoint instead of melody/accompaniment.



Example 11. Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 76, No. 7, mm. 1-10. The main melody and bass line interact to create two-part counterpoint.

Yet another characteristic of Brahms' melodies concerns his integration of melody and texture. Brahms sometimes combines the melody with certain textural

³⁷Wolf, "Brahms," 264.

aspects, making them both more ambiguous. This ambiguity deserves attention because it poses certain interpretive challenges, but understanding the integration can help create a committed and artistic interpretation.³⁸ Instead of allowing every melody to be clearly displayed for listeners, there are times when allowing the melody to ‘hide’ within the texture might not only be appropriate, but directly in line with the composer’s intentions. An excellent example of this can be found in the B section of the Ballade in B Major, Op. 10, No. 4. Brahms writes at the beginning of this section, “*Col intimissimo sentimento ma senza troppo marcare la Melodia*” (With intimate feeling, but without too much marking of the melody), indicating that the melody should *not* be voiced well above the texture (see example 12). Observing this creates a different character and aesthetic for the passage than if the melody was clearly voiced. Knowing the degree to which Brahms would have wanted a melody voiced and contoured depends on the context of the passage and the markings provided by the composer, which are both aspects deserving of attention in the studio and practice room.

Più lento.
Col intimissimo sentimento, ma senza troppo marcare la melodia.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the B section of Brahms' Ballade in B Major, Op. 10, No. 4. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). It features a piano (pp) dynamic and a 'col Ped.' marking. The melody is written in the right hand, and the accompaniment is in the left hand. The melody is not clearly voiced above the texture.

Example 12. Ballade in B Major, Op. 10, No. 4, mm. 47-51. The composer’s marking and placement of the melody suggests his intention of obscurity.

³⁸This integration of texture and melody in Brahms’ music is discussed more extensively in Augustus Arnone’s essay, “The Aesthetics of Textural Ambiguity: Brahms and the Changing Piano.”

Brahms' melodies are unique in their characteristics and sources of inspiration. Some of his melodies are quite long, requiring attention regarding shape and line. In other places, Brahms' melodies draw from folk tunes, either directly or in character. In some instances, his melodies are combined to form functional counterpoint that begs to be realized together. Finally, Brahms occasionally obscures his melodies within the texture, requiring careful interpretive decision from the performer in order to not miss the composer's intent. These various characteristics combined give Brahms a melodic language that is profound and therefore must be addressed with students. Having students isolate and shape melodies independently before reintegrating them in the piece can help with voicing them. Analyzing the lengths of especially long or irregularly phrased melodies can help students find high and low points within phrases, thus helping with contour. All of these strategies should be employed while giving attention to the accompanying texture and the composer's markings in order to create an effective interpretation. These strategies, in turn, will create better melodic shaping and contour while playing Brahms.

Advanced Character Development

While there are many aspects of performance that lead to convincing artistry, one such undeniable aspect is the conveyance of emotional content, character, or mood. Communicating the character and emotional elements of a piece are skills that may seem inherent to a musician; however, effective communication not only requires individual study of the piece being performed, but skills cultivated and trained through years of study. For advancing pianists, character and emotional interpretation are an especially

important skill as they marks yet another layer of convincing performance. The Brahms character pieces are especially effective for teaching a sense of character and mood within music, because they are emotionally complex and challenging works. When interpreting the works of Brahms, attention must be given to the desired characters in the piece, or the music risks sounding flat or dull. Understanding the complex emotions in Brahms' piano music will, therefore, help students and advancing pianists better interpret and convey complex emotions and characters in their performances.

The equivocal nature of Brahms' character pieces is effective in teaching because it challenges students' interpretive abilities. Brahms' character pieces are known for being ambiguous in their relationship to programmatic associations, due to his position as a reactionary against the "New German School."³⁹ While there are some notable exceptions, Brahms' character pieces are abstract, stand-alone pieces with little to no programmatic association. Whereas much of Romantic literature, particularly at the intermediate level, bears titles evocative of the character of the piece, Brahms' pieces do quite the opposite. The most popular title is "Intermezzo," with many other titles being used, such as "Rhapsody," "Capriccio," and "Ballade." These pieces lack consistent naming and titles that evoke the character of the piece. Camilla Cai writes concerning Brahms' naming of the character pieces,

The individual titles: "Intermezzo," "Capriccio," "Ballade," "Rhapsodie," "Romanze," and the later-abandoned title, "Notturmo," each embodied loose, descriptive meanings in the nineteenth century; yet, Brahms' use of these terms seems to lack even these programmatic suggestions, a far cry from the explanatory titles of certain Schumann short piano pieces, for example, "Warum?" or "Papillons."⁴⁰

³⁹Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 332.

⁴⁰Cai, "Brahms' Short, Late Piano Pieces," 262-63.

In contrast to composers like Schumann, Brahms intended for his music to bear no programmatic association. The issue of Brahms' abstract titles is further complicated in knowing that Brahms tended not to assign titles to his pieces until after they were composed. Cai asserts "Brahms' individual piece titles also seem added for publication...because he mentions these titles for the first time in letters to his publisher," and later that the titles were "probably selected after the completion of each piece."^{41, 42} Knowing that the title of the piece bears little connection to the character of the music forces students to look further into the music for such inspiration concerning the individual character of the piece.

While it has been noted by scholars that Brahms avoided programmatic associations for the sake of abstraction, there has been some attempt at organizing the styles of the character pieces according to their titles. Kirby totals the number of pieces from the late period by title in the following way: 18 intermezzi, 7 capriccios, 3 rhapsodies, 1 ballade, and 1 Romanze.⁴³ According to Kirby, the ballades and rhapsodies tend to be larger, more dramatic works, while the intermezzi tend to be moderate, graceful and expressive pieces. The capriccios are typically vivacious and active compositions.⁴⁴ Naturally, there are exceptions to this set of guidelines, such as the Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 118, No. 1, which bears the marking "*Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato*" (not too quickly, but with passion). In spite of a few exceptions, knowing generalizations for character can be a good starting place for developing more

⁴¹Ibid., 262.

⁴²Ibid., 265.

⁴³Kirby, *Music for Piano*, 238.

⁴⁴Ibid.

refined character in the end. For example, knowing the large-scale and dramatic nature of the “rhapsody” would translate well into the Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79. No. 2, where the sudden changes in character play into the rhapsodic nature of the piece. In the first page alone, there are three very distinct characters requiring the performer’s attention: the opening arpeggiated figure, the leaping staccato chordal section, and the expressive lyrical melody (see example 13). A student studying this piece would need to be diligent about making each character shift sudden and distinct, requiring their full range of expressive capabilities.

The image displays the first page of the Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79, No. 2, consisting of four systems of piano and bass clef staves. The first system begins with a tempo marking of *rit.* followed by *a tempo*. The second system includes markings for *rit.*, *a tempo*, and *f risoluto*. The third system features a dynamic marking of *f*. The fourth system starts with *espr.* and *mp*. The score includes various musical notations such as arpeggiated figures, staccato chords, and lyrical melodic lines, along with performance instructions like *rit.*, *a tempo*, *f*, *espr.*, and *mp*.

Example 13. Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79, No. 2, mm. 4-15. Three distinct character shifts require diligent attention from the performer.

Though the characters of the rhapsodies are typically more defined, there are some pieces where the characters are more ambiguous and therefore require a stronger interpretive focus to convey. The Intermezzo in B Minor, Op. 119, No. 1, is puzzling in its fusion of melody and harmony. From the beginning, the listener is unsure of the placement of the melody because of its juxtaposition with the descending thirds in the harmony (see example 14). This ambiguity, which relates the textural ambiguity mentioned earlier by Augustus Arnone, challenges performers and forces them to formulate a clear idea of what they wish to project to the audience.



Example 14. Intermezzo in B Minor, Op. 119, No. 1, mm. 1-11. The melody and harmony are in close juxtaposition, making the melody unclear.

Although it has been noted that Brahms wished to avoid programmatic association, there are a number of examples in which Brahms clearly employs outside inspiration for his music. Being familiar with these pieces is important because they can provide a more solid beginning or starting point to interpreting Brahms' music. One such piece, which has received a fair amount of scholarly attention, is the Ballade in D Minor, Op. 10, No. 1, also known as the "Edward" Ballade. Brahms notes at the beginning of the

Ballade, “*Nach der schottischen Ballade: “Edward” in Herders Stimmen der Völker*” (After the Scottish ballad: “Edward” from Herder’s *Voices of the People*), indicating a specific outside connection upon which the piece is based. According to Charise Hastings, the discourse of the poem ties directly into the formal structure and discourse of the piece.⁴⁵ A student playing this piece would benefit from knowing the poem upon which the piece is based and experimenting with different musical realizations of the poem.

Other examples of programmatic association can be found in Brahms’ melodic content. Discussed previously, the Intermezzo in E-flat Major, Op. 117, No. 1, makes use of a Herder lullaby, which fits perfectly with the melody given by Brahms (see section VII, example 10). Another programmatic connection can be found in the Intermezzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 118, No. 6. Here Brahms opens with a paraphrase of the Gregorian chant, “*Dies irae*,” out of which the entire A section of the piece is spun.⁴⁶ For this piece, playing or having a student sing the “*Dies irae*” melody would not only help with the phrasing at the beginning of the piece, but help set the stage for the character of the piece as a whole (see example 15).

⁴⁵Charise Hastings, “From Poem to Performance: Brahms’s ‘Edward’ Ballade, Op. 10, No. 1,” *College Music Symposium* 48 (2008), 85-86, Accessed September 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25664809>.

⁴⁶Christian Köhn, “Preface” from *Brahms, Klavierstücke, Op. 118*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2010), 9.



Example 15. Intermezzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 118, No. 6, mm. 1-3. The opening melody is a paraphrase of the Gregorian chant, “*Dies irae.*”

Brahms’ character pieces are excellent for challenging students’ interpretive abilities because of their sometimes ambiguous characters and lack of programmatic associations. Whereas much Romantic literature carries evocative titles or strong programs, Brahms’ character pieces lean heavily toward the abstract, requiring pianists to look to the music for concrete artistic ideas. This challenge can be appropriate for advanced students as it can lead to strong interpretive abilities in other pieces as well. For students who struggle with creating convincing interpretations based on the music, teachers may consider starting with one of the Brahms character pieces with some programmatic associations, such as the “Edward” Ballade. Regardless of the programmatic associations or abstract qualities, the complex characters and introspective elements of Brahms’ character pieces will challenge students and help them create strong, convincing artistic performances.

Student Preparation for Brahms

Numerous students are attracted to the sound of Brahms’ music; however, due to the challenges of the music, playing Brahms is relatively inaccessible for intermediate and early advanced piano students. Teachers can, therefore, prepare students in the

intermediate levels of study to one day play the character pieces of Brahms. Attention must be given to several aspects of technical and musical development in order to properly prepare students for Brahms' music. If students are led through a logical sequence of repertoire and technique, then their first experiences playing Brahms will be fruitful and exciting.

At the core of preparing students for Brahms' music is developing a firm understanding of Romantic repertoire. Many of the concepts found in playing Romantic repertoire can be taught and enforced in elementary students. For example, students can begin developing proper phrasing habits in the elementary levels of study. According to Sylvia Hunt, "...introduction to phrasing begins with just two notes beautifully played with legato articulation, expressive dynamic shape, and a breath at the end." Furthermore, Hunt asserts that a student's concept of phrasing expands naturally with the repertoire, so it is important to establish good phrasing habits early.⁴⁷ Another important skill worth developing early in piano study is voicing and balance. James Litzelman notes that maintaining control over different layers of voices is crucial when playing Romantic repertoire and that having students play pieces with different melody/accompaniment patterns can help develop this skill in young players.⁴⁸ Other technical habits to build up in students include healthy touch and tone, proper use of the pedal, and many of the aforementioned skills needed for Brahms' music such as sound control and melodic shaping.

⁴⁷Sylvia Hunt, "What Experiences Prepare for Performing in the Romantic Style?" ed. Marvin Blickenstaff, *Keyboard Companion* 13, No. 3 (Autumn 2002): 35.

⁴⁸James Litzelman, "What Are Some of the Challenges When Playing Romantic Repertoire?" ed. Marvin Blickenstaff, *Keyboard Companion* 13, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 36.

Experienced teachers understand the importance of properly sequenced repertoire. When preparing students to play the music of Brahms, teachers must carefully consider the sequence and types of pieces building their students' skills. For early intermediate students, teachers are encouraged to use pedagogical literature to ensure that students properly grasp the fundamental elements of Romantic repertoire. According to Reid Alexander, using pedagogical literature to prepare students for standard Romantic literature is good because it can "serve a valuable purpose in helping students master pedal technique, voice textures, and read music in a variety of keys."⁴⁹ Examples of pedagogical literature for preparing students to play Romantic literature include William Gillock's *Lyric Preludes in the Romantic Style* and Melody Bober's *Romantic Rhapsodies*. Examples of good preparatory pieces from these pedagogical collections are "Legend" and "Interlude" from Gillock's *Lyric Preludes* and "Midnight Rhapsody" by Melody Bober. These pieces and other pedagogical collections will allow students to tackle the fundamentals of Romantic repertoire in an effective and sequenced manner.

After developing fundamental skills in playing Romanticism, it is important to begin introducing students to standard Romantic literature. An important composer for introducing students to Romanticism is Cornelius Gurlitt. His *Album for the Young*, Op. 140, is regarded as a staple in the Romantic teaching repertoire at the intermediate level and the pieces therein assist in developing many important concepts such as voicing, balance, and phrasing.⁵⁰ There are several other important "Albums for the Young" that can be used to teach Romanticism and prepare students for Brahms, including Robert

⁴⁹Reid Alexander, "Essential Romantic Repertoire for the Middle School and High School Student" in *Creative Piano Teaching* 4th ed., edited by James Lyke, Geoffrey Haydon, and Catherine Rollin (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, 2011), 299.

⁵⁰Magrath, *The Pianist's Guide*, 177.

Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, which spans nearly all intermediate levels of study, and Tchaikovsky's *Album for the Young*, Op. 39, which focuses on the early to mid-intermediate levels.

While it is crucial to familiarize students with the romantic style before they reach the advanced levels of study, it is equally important to prepare students for specific technical and musical skills at the intermediate level before they are ready to play the music of Brahms. A significant collection for preparing students technically and musically is the set of Etudes by Stephen Heller, Opp. 45-47. These etudes focus specifically on topics such as phrasing, balance between voices, and sound control, which are all essential to proper execution of Brahms' music. Additionally, the pieces were likely written from a more abstract point of view, similar to how Brahms conceived his character piece. Magrath writes in her guide to teaching literature, "The titles of pieces are used here when available, though probably were not assigned by Heller. It is conjectured that they were added by the publisher. Heller himself is quoted as saying, 'Music should be evocative rather than descriptive.'"⁵¹ By teaching these pieces from an edition that omits the titles, teachers can begin helping students look to the music for their character interpretations instead of to the titles.

A noteworthy set of pieces that will help prepare students for Brahms is the collection of Lyric Pieces of Edvard Grieg. At sixty-six pieces over ten volumes, these essential pieces are excellent for introducing and refining a student's approach to the character piece. The Lyric Pieces also employ a wide variety of textures, moods, and techniques that would set up advancing pianists well for interpreting the music of

⁵¹Magrath, *The Pianist's Guide*, 183.

Brahms. Properly sequencing the repertoire for late-intermediate students and using carefully selected works that highlight skills needed for playing Brahms, teachers can ensure that students are well-prepared for studying the music of Brahms.

The repertory of Brahms' music is considerably large, and even within the advanced levels of study, there are many different gradations of difficulty among the character pieces. Though there is not a strong consensus on the sequencing of Brahms' character pieces, there may be some character pieces that work better as introductions to the music of Brahms. Reid Alexander mentions the Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2 as "a superb introduction to the more advanced writing of Brahms," and furthermore that many advancing pianists also study the second of the *Zwei Rhapsodien*, Op. 79 (No. 2 in G minor).⁵² Another character piece that may serve as a good introduction to the music of Brahms is the Romanze in F major, Op. 118, No. 5. The opening chords require special attention to voicing, and phrasing in the middle section of the piece is considerably difficult; however, a student who is naturally inclined to phrasing and voicing and has the proper preparation would take well to this piece. Other suitable pieces to consider are the "Edward" Ballade (Op. 10, No. 1) and the Intermezzo in E-flat Major, Op. 117, No. 1.

Although the character pieces of Brahms pose ample challenges for advancing pianists, proper sequencing of repertoire and technical development can make the transition to the advanced music of Brahms more successful. As elementary students, ensuring that the fundamentals of Romanticism are properly introduced through technical exercises and pedagogical compositions is crucial. As students cross into the intermediate

⁵²Alexander, "Essential Romantic Repertoire," 300.

levels of study, introducing them to standard Romantic composers, such as Schumann and Gurlitt, will continue familiarizing them with the Romantic idiom. As students advance to the late-intermediate levels, using literature such as the Heller Etudes and the Grieg Lyric Pieces will further prepare students for Brahms. Finally, once students are into the advanced levels of study, carefully selecting their first Brahms pieces will help promote student success and will help them better grasp the style of Brahms character pieces.

Conclusion

Regarded as some of the composer's most valuable contributions to the piano literature, the character pieces of Johannes Brahms are highly complex works. Brahms' education and formal training as a composer culminated in piano miniatures that are formally, contrapuntally, harmonically, and emotionally dense and intricate. Teachers of advanced students use these character pieces of Brahms to help students develop specific technical and musical skills. The research in this project shows that teaching the character pieces of Johannes Brahms to advancing piano students will improve their ability to handle thick textures, voice and balance multiple layers of sound, manage and control the quality of their sound at the piano, shape and contour a variety of melodic content, and deliver strong interpretations of especially introspective or abstract music. By closely monitoring student technique, using carefully selected teaching techniques, appropriately sequencing repertoire throughout the elementary and intermediate levels, and properly introducing the music of Brahms, teachers can ensure that students are not only fluent players of Romantic music, but also competent in the style of Brahms. Using these

teaching strategies will prepare students who are both technically proficient and musically convincing artists, qualifying them to study repertoire of various styles and skill levels for the rest of their careers.

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APPENDIX

THE CHARACTER PIECES OF JOHANNES BRAHMS

Scherzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 4

The Scherzo, Op. 4, is Brahms' longest character piece. It contains many overtly virtuosic gestures including quick chordal sections and double-octave passages. While many Brahmsian devices exist here, the composer's style and compositional abilities matured significantly after publishing this piece.

Rasch und feurig. Op. 4. (1854)

The image shows the beginning of the Scherzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 4. The music is written for piano in 2/4 time. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Rasch und feurig.' (Quick and fiery). The dynamic marking is 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The score shows the first few measures, including a double-octave passage in the right hand.

Ballades, Op. 10

The Opus 10 Ballades were named as such at publication, despite the third in the set being named "Intermezzo." While the character of these pieces may relate to the traditional literary ballad, they are not the same in scope as the Ballades of Chopin and Liszt. The first is perhaps the most well-known as it is based on a poem by the German poet Johann Gottfried von Herder. All four pieces contain a wide variety of textures, characters, and technical challenges.

No. 1 in D Minor

Andante. Op.10 N^o 1. (1856)

The image shows the beginning of the first Ballade in D Minor, Op. 10 No. 1. The music is written for piano in 3/4 time. The key signature has two flats (B-flat, E-flat). The tempo is indicated as 'Andante.' The dynamic marking is 'p' (piano). The score shows the first few measures, including a double-octave passage in the right hand.

No. 2 in D Major

Andante.
espressivo e dolce Op.10 N^o 2.

p
col Ped.

No. 3, Intermezzo in B Minor

Allegro.

f
Ped.

No. 4 in B Major

Andante con moto.
espressivo Op.10 N^o 4.

p
Ped. mit jedem Takt

Klavierstücke, Op. 76

The pieces that make up Opus 76 mark the beginning of what might be considered the “Brahmsian character pieces.” The works in Opus 76 are remarkably diverse in their use of character and compositional technique, while remaining structurally straightforward. The unrelated key relationships of each movement would suggest that they were not composed as an entire set; however, their publication order provides an alternation of fast and slow movements, which would allow them to be sensibly performed together. Brahms employs many different pianistic techniques throughout the set, making it an excellent large-scale study work. For teachers wishing to extract pieces, each movement is also substantial enough to stand on its own.

No. 1, Capriccio in F-sharp Minor

Op. 76 N° 1.

Un poco agitato.
Unruhig bewegt.

sotto voce
p

Ped. * *Ped.* * *Ped.* *

No. 2, Capriccio in B Minor

Op. 76 N° 2.

Allegretto non troppo.

p grazioso

senza Ped. *Ped.* * *Ped.* *

No. 3, Intermezzo in A-flat Major

Op. 76 N° 3.

Grazioso.
Anmutig, ausdrucksvoll.

p espressivo

Ped. * *Ped.* * *Ped.* *

No. 4, Intermezzo in B-flat Major

Op. 76 N° 4.

Allegretto grazioso.

cantando
p

Ped. * *Ped.* * *Ped.* * *coi Ped. sempre*

No. 5, Capriccio in C-sharp Minor

Agitato, ma non troppo presto.
Sehr aufgeregt, doch nicht zu schnell.

Op. 76 No. 5.

No. 6, Intermezzo in A Major

Andante con moto.
Sanft bewegt.

Op. 76 No. 6.

No. 7, Intermezzo in A Minor

Moderato semplice.

Op. 76 No. 7.

No. 8, Capriccio in C Major

Grazioso ed un poco vivace.
Anmutig lebhaft.

Op. 76 No. 8.

Rhapsodies, Op. 79

The Rhapsodies are among some of Brahms' most well-known character pieces. These larger-scale pieces are frequently played as individual movements and as a set. Characteristic of a rhapsody, both movements have frequent thematic changes and extremely varied textures, rhythms, and characters. Because of the diversity of techniques and compositional devices within each movement, the rhapsodies make excellent introductory pieces to the style of Brahms. The first rhapsody is quite fast and impetuous featuring Brahmsian arpeggiations and scalar passages. The second rhapsody is in sonata form, containing chordal passages and octave melodies.

No. 1 in B minor

Agitato. Op. 79 N^o 1.



No. 2 in G minor

Molto passionato, ma non troppo Allegro. Op. 79 N^o 2.



Fantasies (Klavierstücke), Op. 116

Opus 116 marks the beginning of what are considered the late character pieces (Opp. 116-119). The pieces of Opus 116, while stunning works individually, make a terrific set due to their related keys and thematic relationships. The second Intermezzo possesses a somewhat Scottish character because of its 'snap' rhythm, and the fourth Intermezzo possesses many qualities of a nocturne. The set is further unified by the three capriccios (nos. 1, 3, and 7) and their use of descending thirds in various ways.

No. 1, Capriccio in D Minor

Op. 116. N° 1.

Presto energico.

No. 2, Intermezzo in A Minor

Op. 116. N° 2.

Andante.

No. 3, Capriccio in G Minor

Op. 116. N° 3.

Allegro passionato.

No. 4, Intermezzo in E Major

Op. 116. N° 4.

Adagio.

No. 5, Intermezzo in E Minor

Andante con grazia ed intlimissimo sentimento. Op. 116. N^o 5.

p dolce
Ped. simile sempre

No. 6, Intermezzo in E Major

Andantino teneramente. Op. 116. N^o 6.

p dolce e ben legato

No. 7, Capriccio in D Minor

Allegro agitato. Op. 116. N^o 7.

f ben marc.

Klavierstücke, Op. 117

The shortest set of the late piano pieces, Opus 117 exhibits Brahms' devotion to the lullaby, both in the simplicity and somewhat subdued nature of the pieces and the melodic content of the outer two intermezzi. The first intermezzo has a melody constructed around the text of a poem from Herder, and the third intermezzo in C-sharp minor contains simple phrasing reminiscent of a lullaby. The progressive harmonies of the second intermezzo are realized through delicate arpeggiations. As a set of music or individual pieces, Opus 117 is an excellent study in pianistic nuance and sensitivity.

No. 1, Intermezzo in E-flat Major

Andante moderato. Op.117. N° 1.

semplice p dolce

No. 2, Intermezzo in B-flat Minor

Andante non troppo e con molta espressione. Op.117. N° 2.

p dolce

No. 3, Intermezzo in C-sharp Minor

Andante con moto. Op.117. N° 3.

molto p e sotto voce sempre

senza Ped.

Klavierstücke, Op. 118

The pieces in Opus 118 remain favorites among performers and students alike because of their diversity and striking characters. The key relationships and alternation of slow and fast movements make Opus 118 a cohesive set to play for a recital; however, several of the pieces are substantial enough for individual study. The second intermezzo in A major is perhaps the most well-known of all the Brahms character pieces and makes a wonderful introduction to Brahmsian melody, balance, and texture management. The final intermezzo in E-flat minor, based loosely on the Gregorian chant “Dies irae,” contains many progressive harmonies and instances of thick textures and characters common to Brahms, and makes a very effective performance piece. Many of the other pieces in this set, such as the G minor Ballade and the Romanze in F Major are striking piano miniatures and deserve the attention of teachers and performers.

No. 1, Intermezzo in A Minor

Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato.

Op. 118 N°1

Musical score for No. 1, Intermezzo in A Minor. The score is written for piano in A minor, 3/4 time. It features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato.' The dynamics include a forte 'f' marking. The piece is identified as Op. 118 N°1. There are four 'Ped.' markings in the bass line, with an asterisk under the third one.

No. 2, Intermezzo in A Major

Andante teneramente.

Op. 118 N° 2.

Musical score for No. 2, Intermezzo in A Major. The score is written for piano in A major, 3/4 time. It features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'Andante teneramente.' The dynamics include a piano 'p' marking and a 'pdol.' marking. The piece is identified as Op. 118 N° 2. There are four 'Ped.' markings in the bass line, with an asterisk under the fourth one.

No. 3, Ballade in G Minor

Allegro energico.

Op. 118 N° 3.

Musical score for No. 3, Ballade in G Minor. The score is written for piano in G minor, 3/4 time. It features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'Allegro energico.' The dynamics include a forte 'f' marking. The piece is identified as Op. 118 N° 3. There are five '5' markings above the right hand, indicating fingerings.

No. 4, Intermezzo in F Minor

Allegretto un poco agitato.

Op. 118 N° 4.

Musical score for No. 4, Intermezzo in F Minor. The score is written for piano in F minor, 3/4 time. It features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto un poco agitato.' The dynamics include a piano 'p' marking. The piece is identified as Op. 118 N° 4. There are two '8' markings in the bass line, indicating octaves.

No. 5, Romanze in F Major

Op. 118 N^o 5.

Andante.

espressivo

No. 6, Intermezzo in E-flat Minor

Op. 118 N^o 6.

Andante, largo e mesto.

p sotto voce dolente

Klavierstücke, Op. 119

The final pieces Brahms composed for solo piano, Opus 119, are remarkable in their character, harmonies, and textures. Perhaps the most well-known of these pieces is the Rhapsody in E-flat Major, the fourth in the set. While still rhapsodic in nature, the E-flat Rhapsody differs from the Opus 79 rhapsodies in its scale and more straightforward structure. The opening Intermezzo in B minor represents an intentional ambiguity between melody and harmony, and the E minor Intermezzo exhibits a kind of introspective angst. Together with the joyful singing quality of the C Major intermezzo, Opus 119 makes a delightful set for a performance or study.

No. 1, Intermezzo in B minor

Op. 119 N^o 1.

Adagio.

No. 2, Intermezzo in E minor

Andantino un poco agitato. Op. 119 N° 2.

p sotto voce e dolce *sost.* *sf* *Ped. sempre simile*

No. 3, Intermezzo in C Major

Grazioso e giocoso. Op. 119 N° 3.

molto p e leggièro *col Ped.*

No. 4, Rhapsody in E-flat Major

Allegro risoluto. Op. 119 N° 4.

f