

Brahms – The Decay of Passion and the Sense of Death – On 6 Pieces op. 118

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I don't know if there is much truth in the view, which inspired many romantic musicologists that any great composer expressed and perhaps was even directed by a basic emotion or idea. In this spirit many have talked, for instance, on the centrality of the idea of struggle and the emotion of victory in Beethoven, or on the deep sense of pain and sorrow in Schubert, or on the sense of a divine glory of nature in Bruckner, etc. Very often such sayings seem superficial, simplistic, subjective and not particularly insightful. But sometimes they seem apt, and this is true particularly when they are connected to an analysis of musical features of the works concerned. Granting these reservations, I cannot avoid feeling that the music of Brahms, particularly his late works, is imbued with a particular sense of death, and I shall try to explain and demonstrate it with op. 118.

It is rather difficult to put this feeling into words (which to some degree I shall nevertheless try below), so let me first say what it is not.

The sense of death I am talking about is, of course not the natural biological notion of death, and is not the regular sense of the **fear of death**. As far as I know, Brahms did not fear death, and judged by his letters and some other evidence he looked on death with open eyes as a natural, normal and inevitable phenomenon of human life. In any case it is not such fear that I am talking about. It is also **not a religious notion of death** – there is no view of a transcendent world, or of God, of life after death etc. In spite of being raised and living in a protestant environment his attitude to death, and the concept of death I am talking about is not religious, in the common sense. Neither is it **mythological** or mysterious – it is not concerned with a mythological view of gods of death, or of mythological death journeys. It is also not the **romantic conception** of death as a desired goal, or as the peak of burning love or as an inevitable "solution" to an unfulfilled love (cf. Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*). It is also **not melancholy or depression**. Brahms, who was very reserved concerning his personal feelings, described himself as melancholic. In a letter to the conductor Lachner he wrote (regarding the 1st movement of the second symphony): "**I am, by and by, a severely melancholic person ...black wings are constantly flapping above us**".¹ This is an interesting testimony, and though not untypical of many 19th century artists – novelists, poets, painters and musicians,² it reflects in Brahms' music more, I believe, than in any other.³ And yet, it is not this gloomy atmosphere of melancholy I am talking about, and it is not even a sense of depression (of which melancholy, according to Freud is a certain degree, in which "one loses interest in the outside world"), which is expressed, e.g. in some Intermezzi of op. 116 and 117. It is rather a more pointed and radical feeling of what I shall call a sense of

¹ Cited in Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 128.

² Ernest Bloch called melancholy "the secret keyword of the age" (cited in Brinkmann *ibid*).

³ This is true of many works, but Brahms himself, in a letter to Clara Schumann of 1893 talked of his Intermezzo in B minor op. 119/1 in terms of melancholy (Brinkmann *ibid*.)

death. In melancholy there is estrangement and detachment, which is rather foreign to the feeling I am talking about, which, in contrast to melancholy, is very much involved, as we shall see, with the dynamics of passion.

The sense of death I am talking about is rather a **conception of death as the ultimate decay, or the ultimate end-point of a process of the extinction of yearning, longing and passion, which are the essence of life.** This is a conception of death as a feature of life, as an aspect of the life experience. The expressions of yearning, longing and passion in Brahms are not merely followed by their decay and extinction; they are rather imbued themselves with a sense of their inevitable fading and extinguishing. I would like to call it a **humanistic conception of death.** Brahms even wanted to title his Requiem – written after his mother's death – "Human Requiem" (later changing the name to "German Requiem").

This, I believe, is a characteristic mark of much of Brahms's music, and in this respect his music is very different from other romantics like Mendelssohn, Schumann, or Chopin. Their music is of course, expressive, emotional and passionate not less than his. And there are moments of lugubrious melancholy also in e.g. Schumann and Chopin, but one does not sense in their music this sense of death, certainly not in the intensity and persistence in which it is in Brahms. Though I have been speaking of a "sense of death" here I am aware that the term may be disputed and I don't insist on it, hoping that my intention will get through.

The sense of death I am talking about is noticeable already in Brahms' early works, but it is more apparent and characteristic of the late works. It is related to but somewhat different from that of his "Four Serious Songs" (*Vier ernste Gesaenge*) of 1896, the three first of which deal with death explicitly. They were written in the shadow of Clara Schumann's approaching death, and Brahms' own awareness of his terminal illness. They were written to biblical texts Brahms compiled (from Ecclesiastes 3 and 4, Sirach⁴, and Paulus to the Corinthians, 13), and they display, I believe, different notions or variants of a notion of death from the one I am trying to present here. A detailed exposition of this would involve detailed analysis of the texts and the music of the songs that would take us too far away. I shall not pursue it here.⁵

I shall now turn to some features of the way this conception of death or the sense of death is expressed I believe in op. 118. The work was published in 1893, and is almost Brahms' last composition for piano and among his last compositions in general. It is the third of four series of short pieces for the piano he composed in his last years (long after saying in 1860 he would stop composing...) – op. 116-119.⁶ Though much of what I shall

⁴ Incidentally, in the same year in which the work was composed – 1896 – some Hebrew sources of the book of Sirach were found in the Geniza in Cairo.

⁵ Let me just remark that it is significant to Brahms' general conception of death that although the first three songs deal with death proper, the last one follows Paul's declaring Faith, Hope and above all Love – three basic human attitudes or emotions – as the essence of life.

⁶ These masterpieces are paradigms of Brahms' perfectionism, as he told Henschel: "One ought never to forget that by perfecting one piece one gains more than by half-finishing a dozen ... keep going back to it ... until there is not a note too much or too little, not a bar you could improve upon. Whether it is beautiful is an entirely different matter, but perfect it must be... I am rather lazy but I never cool down over a work, once begun, until it is perfected, unassailable" (cited from M, Musgrave, *Brahms Reader*, Yale, 2000, p. 77).

discuss applies to some pieces in the other series, we shall concentrate here however on op. 118. Though it consists of six different pieces, I think it is important to see it as a coherent whole, and I hope that what I say here can contribute to that.

I assume that the notes are open before the reader and shall often refer to bar numbers.

The **first piece** is an Intermezzo, and unlike most of Brahms' Intermezzi, it is quite stormy and passionate. Yet it displays I believe an essential feature of the sense of death I am talking about. This may look surprising when death is conceived in the more conventional ways, which are expected to be expressed in a quiet, solemn and mournful ways. But it should not be that surprising with relation to the particular Brahmsian conception I have in mind.

The work consists in fact of a series of stormy passionate eruptions, which immediately decay and are extinguished. One can distinguish three parts in this short piece. Though the piece in general is in A minor, the first part pulls towards F (in spite of the long E (1) – C (3) – A (5) in the right hand). It consists of 10 bars of a descending scale of an octave (C² to C¹) which is built as a sequence of two passionate descending seconds (with an upbeat), expanded to a descending chromatic progression.



Each second is of great passion, but the whole sequence is decreasing in pitch and volume. This, together with the great extension of the last one, gives the whole phrase a sinking and dying effect – an effect of gradual decay of the passionate outbursts of which it consists. This is a nutshell expression of the sense of death I am talking about – a decay of passionate arousal – and it is present already here in the opening phrase.

Motivically, one should notice a characteristic contrapuntal move. In which the descending seconds in bb. (5-10) are answered by ascending seconds in the alt and tenor.

The above pattern of a passionate outcry, which gradually decays is also characteristic of the second part (from b. 11) which is in A and in which the seconds are in the opposite direction, but are also followed by a downwards decay on the diminished seventh (of E, bb. 12-14, and of A, bb. 16-17). This pattern of great emotional arousal with passionate outcries, which is immediately sinking and decayed, is expressed on even a greater scale in the second half (from b. 17) of this (second) part. A sequence of three passionate outbursts of descending seconds (bb. 19, 21, 23), each prepared by a chromatic ascent in

the bass, is answered by an expanded phrase of descending seconds, compacting the opening phrase, with the typical extinguishing effect (bb. 25-30).

This is also the essence of the third part (from b. 32) in which a sequence of seconds passing between arpeggios of diminished chords is "broken" in b. 36, and then the passionate character of these seconds is completely extinguished (bb. 38-39) when the decreasing second is spread over two bars in an ending in which the dying and extinguishing character of the music is brought to the fore.

In order to have this character of the dying of passion better in view, one should perhaps compare this piece with e.g. op. 116/3, whose first part in its entirety is full of passionate outbursts, but without the immediate decaying or dying endings (or at least, without them in such an emphatic and obvious way). The middle section there displays the decaying of passion in a way much more akin to the one we have here in op. 118. Op. 116 in general is, not less than op. 118, a coherent whole (beginning and ending in D minor, with pieces in A, G and E in the middle), and this pattern of a great passion decaying or dying is manifested not only within some of its single pieces, but even more clearly in the relationships between different pieces (e.g. 1 as against 2; 3 as against 4).

The **second** piece, also an Intermezzo, is in A major, and it is the mostly played and the better known of the whole opus. It is built in the classical A – B – A' form, where the middle part is in the relative minor – F# – in which the characteristic Brahmsian contrapuntal flickering between the soprano and the middle voice gives it its special charm. This is a quiet and lugubrious song, very different, even opposite in character to the first Intermezzo. In contrast to the stormy outbursts of the first piece, everything here is much more restrained, more delicate, and in a gloomy and quiet atmosphere. And yet, it also expresses yearning and longing, which do not come to fulfillment, and decay; or perhaps – a reflection or reminiscence of these. It is this quite remote and reflective character which is so characteristic of this piece.

The main theme, repeated over and over again, is a classical period, whose first sentence is on I and the second – built with the same rhythmic pattern – is on V. It has a reflective or meditating character. However, it is not mere reflection, but reflection on the pattern of yearning and its decay as manifested e.g. in bb. 16-34. Here a sequence of subtle arousals of passion, first on the lower VI, then on the lower II, which is intensified with a great crescendo, and after a chromatic uprising reaches a peak in which it breaks down in great frustration (bb. 30-34). Here bb. 29-34 with the peak, and the break-down:



The motive of this peak and its break-down is the very motive of the main (first) reflective theme, split between the soprano and the bass in reverse order. What could better express musically the idea that the reflection was on this passionate arousal, that this was its "content"? The reflective theme (a) then returns (in inversion) as if meditating

upon this from above, as a result of which the passionate theme returns but in a complying and quiet form, harmonized on a stable VI-IV-II-V-I progression, without its previous arousal, as if coming to terms with its dying. The first part then is in the form a-b-a'-b', where a is the reflective theme, b (b. 16) is the frustrated passionate theme (the "content" of the reflection), a' (b. 34) is a sort of an inversion of the reflective a, and b' is the decay and dying of the passionate theme.

The second part (B, from b. 49), with all its harmonic richness and contrapuntal sophistication, is also built of symmetrical classical periods, repeated over and over again. One should notice the general flow of the melody here which displays a descending octave (F#¹ to F#², bb. 49-53, with crossed voices in the last bar) which is reminiscent of the descending octave we noticed in the first piece. This organizing of the melodic material within a general line of a descending octave, which we shall encounter again, is characteristic of the Brahmsian expression of the decay of emotional arousal. Here is the beginning of part B:



In the middle of part B its theme is presented in a chorale setting with rich harmony in pianissimo. It then returns to the contrapuntal setting with the voices exchanged – the middle voice first, and the upper one second. Part A is then repeated with small changes.

The **third** piece is a Ballade in G minor. It is also in the form of A – B – A', and it is marked by its vigorous rhythm and its dense harmony. The broad melodic line of its main theme displays the descending octave (G to G⁻¹) similar to the one we encountered in the first Intermezzo and in the B section of the second. The middle section B is in b minor⁷ – a very distant key from the tonic. It is opposed in its character to the first theme and consists of a charming melody in pianissimo in a dotted rhythm, which Brahms was very fond of (cf. Hungarian Dances, WoO1 no. 1 also in G minor, no 5 in F# minor no 8 in C, the last movement of Piano Concerto no 2 in Bb, and many more). This is derived from the ending of the first phrase of the main theme (b. 3), and is gently prepared in the ending of section A. Harmonically this B section is dominated by weak plagal moves (IV-I) which contrast the emphatic dominant moves of the main theme. This plagal character is emphasized in a coda, which combines the first and second themes. It is particularly in this coda that one feels the sense of decay of emotional arousal I am talking about, though less obviously than in the previous pieces. Here is its ending:

⁷ Charles Rosen indicates that the melody here "tends towards G# minor" while the left hand is clearly in the relative major B (see his "Brahms the Subversive", in *Brahms Studies* (ed. G.S. Bozarth), Oxford University Press, 1990, 105-119, p. 110). He mentions this as an example of Brahms' subverting classical norms. Though Rosen's general point seems to me persuasive, this particular example is less so, for the right-hand melody can be heard in B in perfect phase with the left. For perhaps a better example Rosen doesn't mention see Intermezzo op.118/6, to be discussed below.



The **fourth** piece is again an Intermezzo (in F minor). It is a pearl even in Brahmsian standards. It is again in A – B – A' form with a coda, where this time A' is quite different from A – in fact a development of it. But all the three parts are as we shall see tightly interconnected. The Intermezzo has a sophisticated and somewhat concealed contrapuntal texture. Its first theme, dominated by an opposite triplets movement between the alt and the bass, hides a simple **canon at the octave**, where the second voice (in the tenor) enters one quarter after the first (in the soprano). The triplets, expressing restrained sighs of longing, display a gentle syncopating effect, when the tonic occurs on the weak beat in each bar, and their general line form an opposite movement of fourths. The hidden canon at the octave becomes conspicuous in bb. 7-11, when a warm melody brings to the fore the above hidden fourth, and displays the typical descending octave we have encountered in the three previous pieces. In the second half of the first section (from b. 16) the triplets movement is expanded, with gentle hemiola effect (b. 19, 22 etc.). This hemiola effect, breaking the 2/4 bars into three, is insistently rejected, as it were, in bb. 28-31, where the two triplets per bar are clearly regained.

The concealed canon at the octave is revealed and brought to the open in **section B**, where it forms its essence. It, as it were, reveals the secret, when it moves by one voice copying the other in exact repeats of one octave lower, with one quarter delay, as in the concealed canon of section A. In A, as in all the three previous pieces, we noticed a descent of an octave as an important element in the general melodic line (we shall encounter it again in the fifth). One can speculate that the raw canon at the octave in our piece, and particularly in its middle section B is a sort of a reminder or even a distilled summation of this.

For our concerns here the main interest is in the A' part (from b. 90). It opens with a loud passionate cry, exploiting the harmony of the last soft and pianissimo phrase of section B, while keeping the canonic texture (between soprano and tenor). This tensed outcry culminates in a forte re-statement of the main theme of A, where their repetitive and canonic texture is openly stated (bb.98-110). Here bb. 90-94, and 98-102:



The general canonic texture (between soprano and tenor) is kept in the next and closing theme (from b. 114), which is a variant of the opening outcry motive of section A'. Great tension is kept up to the ultimate point (b. 126) from which it rapidly breaks down in a loud crash and sinks to extinction in a plagal cadence (II-I), still keeping all the way the canonic texture.

There is a clear and persuasive emotional plot behind this magnificent compositional edifice. A calm, somewhat prosaic and tranquil course is shaken and taken up by great emotional passion, which gives new meaning to the elements of this course. But at its peak it breaks down, decays and extinguishes. This is the Brahmsian moment of death I am trying to elucidate.

The **fifth** piece is a Romance (*Romanze*) in F major, built in the A – B – A' form. The theme of A is a period consisting of a wide melody whose essence is once again a descending octave

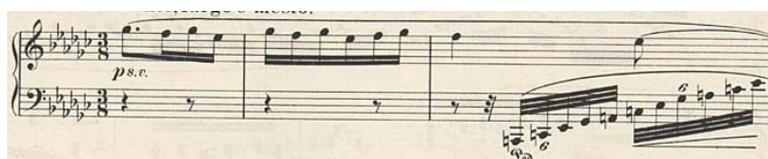
(reminiscent of the descending octaves we found in all previous pieces) presented in a rich contrapuntal texture in which the two inner voices move in octaves parallel to the upper one with slight variations. The period ends, somewhat unexpectedly, with a cadence to III (b. 8). The melodic simplicity and the harmonic density, with the rhythmic homogeneity and its serious and heavy progression in 6/4 give an impression of a solemn procession or a quiet inevitable flow like of a wide river.

Section B is in D major – the dominant of the unexpected III mentioned above. It is in a much faster tempo and its theme is quite jolly, almost mischievous, alternating between I and II, with the characteristic Brahmsian dotted rhythm in the bass with an organ point on D. It is repeated several times, each ending with a trill and an ascending scale, with a gradual acceleration of the tempo until an airy arpeggio on its skeletal harmony empties it of its mischievous character. This leads to a transitory passage on the tails of trills and scales, leading back to the return of the solemn first theme. This return is marked with an emotional intensification of yearning (b. 52), which immediately yields to a sinking extinction in which the piece ends in pianissimo. This passage is, I believe, important in displaying once again the emotional pattern of extinguishing great passion to the point of its annihilation, which is the main point I am trying to get through. The fact that this occurs at the very ending of a piece, which otherwise is calm, solid, assured and even jolly, gives it special significance. Here is this ending phrase (from b. 51, which ends the previous phrase):



In many ways this F major piece seems a major counterpart to the previous one in F minor. Its contrapuntal writing is much simpler and less sophisticated, and yet one cannot avoid noticing the similarity between the contrapuntal movement of the middle voices moving in octaves against the upper voice and the contrapuntal canon of the previous piece which was also in octaves but in a phase of a quarter. Here admittedly there are no passionate outcries and no abundant use of tensed diminished chords as in the third (A') section of the previous piece – quite the contrary. And yet, the ending of this piece, as noted above, expresses a similar mood, though on a much smaller scale, in a much more restrained fashion.

The **Sixth** piece is titled an Intermezzo (though Ballade would perhaps fit it better). It is singled out in the series also in its key of E-flat minor, and is in the form of A – B – A'. It openly reveals the secret of the whole series I have been talking about – the sense of death. Its main melody, appearing right at the beginning in a single voice in piano, is the melody of the *dies irae* of the Christian requiem, known since medieval times, which is **the** motive of death in music.



It recurs many times in the piece in various forms and disguises. The quiet, sort of whispering accompaniment of arpeggio of the diminished seventh of Bb (V), while the melody is obviously in Eb, (see note 7) intensifies this death feeling in giving it a mysterious, out-worldly atmosphere. But then (b. 8) comes the Brahmsian stroke of genius when he uses the same motive with the same accompanying texture and turns it into a mundane, almost prosaic melody, even opening it up in a little canonic passage (bb. 13-16), as if to tell us that it is part of our life. But this immediately crashes back to the bare death motive in deep octaves in Bb (bb. 17-20). The whole main subject of the section then returns, with a beautiful variant of the accompaniment of the death motive at the beginning.

Section B is in the relative Gb major. It has a very definite heroic (tragic-heroic) character, high spirited, full of courage and forcible vigor, like a tragic hero facing death with determination and strong spirit. And indeed, just within the heroic motive, the death motive of section A suddenly re-appears in all its might and awful character with full and tensed harmony in fortissimo, with a compelling hemiolic rhythm (53-54). Here is the opening of the B section and then the death motive in bb. 53-4:



Towards the end of the section this frightening appearance of the death motive recurs (60-61), but is immediately softened and ends with a cadence that gradually sinks on Ab⁷, as if preparing a Db. But this does not appear, and in its stead the A section returns (62) with slight changes. The most noticeable one is a turn into the major (Cb, b. 67) in which the death motive shines with light in the upper register. But as if to tell us that this shining episode is an illusion, the music soon sinks back into Eb minor in the deep bass in which the death motive is once again heard in its bare form in octaves. The last phrase of the piece is once again the death motive – this time in full harmony, ending with an emphatic dominant cadence (V-I) in fortissimo, as if to emphasize its terminality. It soon sinks down to the lower Eb, on whose arpeggiated chord in pianissimo the work and its death journey end – living for eternity.

Gilead Bar-Elli, Jerusalem, February 2014