

Liszt Academy of Music

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**BRAHMS'S B-MAJOR TRIO:
CONTEXTS OF THE EARLY AND THE LATE
VERSION**

PhD Theses

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Background and research objectives

Johannes Brahms's B-major Piano Trio, Op. 8, is actually two piano trios: an early and a late piece. In public knowledge and in concert life, Op. 8 generally covers the Trio recomposed in 1889, distinguished only as a new or revised edition from the original 1854 work. When revising the piece, Brahms did considerably more than correct the mistakes of his early Trio – as suggested by many of the late 19th and 20th century narratives. He substantially rewrote all the movements with the exception of the Scherzo. He created a piece that is identical to the Piano Trio of 1854 in many of its distinguishing features, yet fundamentally different. He did so without overriding or invalidating his youthful piece.

As early as 1926, Hans Gál, in his preface to the ‘Old Complete Edition’ of Brahms’s works, drew attention to the exceptional opportunity of studying his compositional work by the comparison of the two versions. More than half a century later, Ernst Herttrich and Franz Zaunschirm undertook this task, both focusing on Brahms's compositional thinking in their detailed analyses of the early and late Trios (Ernst Herttrich. “Johannes Brahms Piano Trio in B major, Opus 8. Frühfassung und Spätfassung: Ein analytischer Vergleich”, in Martin Bente (ed.). *Music, Edition, Interpretation, Memorial of Günter Henle*, Munich: Henle, 1980, 218–236; Franz Zaunschirm. *Der frühe und der späte Brahms. Eine Fallstudie anhand der autographen Korrekturen und gedruckten Fassungen zum Trio Nr. 1 für Klavier, Violine und Violoncello opus 8*, Hamburg: Wagner, 1988). However, neither of them, addressed the context in which these versions were written and both took the late trio as the absolute point of reference. This view was reinforced in the aforementioned preface by Hans Gál, who contrasted the ‘weaknesses’ of the early version with the ‘unsurpassed objectivity’ of the rewritten work. Zaunschirm presented ‘the perfection of craftsmanship of the mature Brahms’ in the rewritten Trio, while Herttrich simply stated that the new work was ‘undoubtedly more mature and better’ regarding its formal features.

Although the arguments proclaiming the dominance of the rewritten B-major Piano Trio have been much softened, analyses that consider the early and late versions as fundamentally equal remain rare. Among them, Roger Moseley’s 2007 study stands out, focusing on the allusions and musical influences that can be detected in the piece, and showing how these influences reflect the relationship of Brahms and his critics, friends, contemporaries and composers of the past who were important to him (“Reforming Johannes: Brahms, Kreisler Junior and the Piano Trio in B flat, Op. 8”, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 132 (2007)/2, 252–305). Moseley’s analysis has opened up a number of exciting questions for the study of the B-major Trio, suggesting or hinting at directions of research which I could follow in my thesis.

I also keep the study of Brahms’s relationship network in the focus of my own analysis. An indispensable inspiration for this has been Paul Berry’s 2014 monograph titled *Brahms Among Friends: Listening, Performance and the Rhetoric of Allusion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), whose case studies provide a richly varied example of how an exploration of the musical and personal dialogue between Brahms and his friends can help to reveal the possible layers of meaning in a musical piece. Berry’s analyses do not include the Trio in B major, nor does Margaret Notley’s 2007 work titled *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 2007). In her monograph, Notley discusses the notions of historical-cultural and musical lateness as well as Brahms's late style, and seeks to place Brahms in the context of late 19th-century Vienna through a multifaceted account of the musical-political environment and a rich musical analysis of his late chamber works. He does not refer to the Trio in B major as a late work, thus creating a gap that I can fill in with my thesis.

The aim of my work is to reflect on the act of rewriting and reveal the contexts in which it can make sense. I have attempted to understand what might have motivated Brahms to rewrite the B-major Piano Trio, and why he rejected or preserved certain musical material. By examining the circumstances of the composition, Brahms's circle of friends and musicians, his social networks, the dialogue between the early and late piece, and possible allusions embodied in the Piano Trio, I have outlined contexts in which I could illuminate the relationship between the *new* and the *old* work from as many different perspectives as possible. In my thesis, I do not consider the rewritten Trio in B major as a revised early piece, but as a late work whose starting point is the 1854 Trio. This approach is reinforced by Brahms's message to Clara Schumann in 1889: "I have written my Trio in B major once more, and I would prefer to call it Op. 108 instead of Op. 8."

Sources, research methods and structure of the thesis

A significant part of my work was desk research: I collected significant analyses of the B-major Trio, and at the same time I got to know the mainstreams of Brahms studies and selected the approaches that were most in line with my objectives. I also paid attention to the contradictions that emerged from the literature, and I constantly sought parallels and differences in previous works to clarify and further reflect on my own interpretations.

First, the Brahms literature led me to the most important sources from his era, which I explored in more depth following my own research questions. I studied Brahms's correspondence with Clara and Robert Schumann, Joseph Joachim, Heinrich and Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, Julius Otto Grimm, the publishers Breitkopf & Härtel, Fritz Simrock and Theodor Billroth, and I also consulted several times Max Kalbeck's Brahms biography and the diary of Clara Schumann published by Berthold Litzmann. Among the reviews published in the contemporary press, the surviving writings of Eduard Hanslick, Adolf Schubring and Eusebius Mandyczewski were particularly helpful in my inquiry of the two versions of the B-major Trio and in exploring their contexts.

Brahms made a clear reference to the romantic figure of E. T. A. Hoffmann's texts when he signed several of his works, including the B-major Piano Trio, as Johannes Kreisler in the early 1850s. By reading Hoffmann's writings, I have sought to understand how Brahms's artistic personality was shaped by his identification with Kreisler and, through him, with certain aesthetic principles of German Romanticism. I have paid particular attention to the phenomena of fantasy, artistic self-discovery, creativity, playing with the limits of expression, improvisation, fragmentation and studies of counterpoint, all of which are recurrent elements in Hoffmann's writings on music, and several of which play an important role in Brahms's early works. I have analysed Brahms's works signed as Kreisler in search of traces of a *Kreislerian* conception of music; besides the Trio in B major, my thesis includes examples of the Piano Sonata in C major, Op. 1 and the Schumann Variations, Op. 9.

After the discussion on the Brahms-Kreisler relationship, in Chapter I.2 I list a number of possible approaches to Brahms's lateness and the late characteristics of his music, which include the different perspectives of the composer's contemporaries as well as the approaches of 20th and 21st century musicology. In order to understand the concepts of late style and the lateness in music, I have examined both Brahms's musical historical lateness and the problems of the periodization of the composer's oeuvre. I have also explored how the political ideologies and social realities of 19th century Vienna shaped the discourses concerning Brahms's music.

The Huby–Popper String Quartet and thus Budapest played a prominent role in the promotion of Brahms's late chamber music. As a guest of the Hungarian musicians, Brahms played his latest chamber works at the Vigadó five times between 1886 and 1891, several of them as premieres. The reception of these works reveals many similarities with the reception in Vienna. I have summarised these motifs by reviewing the following newspapers: *Budapesti Hírlap*, *Budapesti Ujság*, *Egyetértés*, *Fővárosi Lapok*, *Nemzet*, *Pesti Hírlap*, *Pesti Napló*, *Pester Lloyd*, *Zenelap*.

After sketching the contexts of the early and late piece, I describe and compare the structure of the 1854 and 1889 Piano Trio in B major, movement by movement. The following sources survive from the two versions: 1) the autograph of the early version, which Brahms dated January 1854 and which served as the engraver's model for the Breitkopf & Härtel first edition; 2) the score and parts of the early version, published in November 1854 by Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig; 3) Brahms's copy of the first edition – with his own handwritten corrections which he later added to the rewritten version; 4) a copy prepared by Brahms's copyist, William Kupfer, as engraver's model for the first edition of the late piece, including Brahms's handwritten corrections; 5) the first edition of the rewritten version (score and parts), published in February 1891 by Simrock, Berlin. I have taken the first edition of 1854 published by Breitkopf & Härtel and the new edition of 1891 published by Simrock as the starting point for my analysis and the model for my musical examples. I have listed the most important differences between the two versions, which have also served as the basis for my thematic chapters on the individual movements. In some cases, I have also cited examples from the Kupfer manuscript which may shed light on compositional problems relevant to my analysis.

The formal and structural differences outlined in Chapter II.1 are further discussed in the thematic chapters of Part II – assigning four different interpretative backgrounds to the four different movements. I analyse the first movement in the light of musical-political discourses on Brahms's music (Chapter II.2); in Chapter II.3 I try to capture the unchanging nature and features of the Scherzo; in the Adagio I explore the manifestations of Kreisler's characters (Chapter II.4); and in the finale I explore the motifs of remembrance at various levels (Chapter II.5). I believe that all these aspects, taken together and in interaction with each other, can contribute to a more nuanced and richer understanding of the complex relationship between the two versions and thus of the act of rewriting.

Findings

The 1854 and the 1889 versions of the B-major Trio have a very ambivalent stance to each other. This ambivalence is evident in the most varied aspects: in the changing forms of a musical motif, in the outlines of certain formal sections, in the formation of Brahms's identity as a composer, in his statements about the rewriting, or in his friends' and colleagues' reviews of the trio. In my dissertation, I have collected these aspects.

Typical tropes of 19th-century Brahms reception, ideas about musical intellect and musical logic, permeated the evaluation of the rewritten B-major Trio. Brahms appeared in these writings both as an 'academic' composer of considerable authority and as a composer who primarily composes chamber music. The controversies centred around the question: was it the 'traditional' Brahms who censored the young composer's innovative, imaginative excesses, or was it Brahms the 'progressive' who modernised the immature attempts of his early style? The juxtaposition of sometimes quite different interpretations highlight the variety of meanings that a single musical problem can call forth – in association with the different approaches, even the motivations and ideological positions of the analysts.

An examination of the first theme of the opening movement immediately illustrates how the same musical element can be seen both as the work of the 'academic composer' (if we focus on the technique of developing variation) and as a melody related to folk or even hymnal idioms as we seek to catch its tone, its general character. The neuralgic point of the opening movement of the 1854 Trio is the *fugato* section in the recapitulation, which greatly intrigued even Brahms's contemporaries. Many saw this section as a whim, a fancy of the young composer, a sign of immaturity or even a mistake to be corrected. This *fugato* could also strengthen the image of a 'historical' composer turning to the past, seemingly unable to get rid of outdated musical devices. The removal of the *fugato* section is a significant aspect of the rewriting of the 1854 opening movement – by excising it, Brahms removed a conspicuous symbol of 'contrived music' from the piece.

In contrast to the episodic second theme area in the first movement of the 1854 version, in the same formal section of the rewritten version Brahms handles the thirds that permeate the entire section with a striking organic work. The third-chains, which appear as a motivic and harmonic device in several of the composer's other works, embody both the image of the thoughtful, scholarly composer and the notions of nostalgia, autumnal sound and melancholy. How the sonata forms of the two opening movements fulfil or fail to meet our expectations is made tangible by their different approaches to the recapitulation. With the 1889 version, Brahms was rethinking not only the musical material of this formal section, but also the nature of recapitulation itself.

When Brahms began composing the Scherzo for the Piano Trio in B major, he had already been intensely interested in the scherzo genre for several years. From the 1870s onwards, he rarely called the fast middle movements of his instrumental works Scherzo – he explicitly added this title the last time to the fast middle movement of the Piano Trio in C major, Op. 87, completed in June 1882. With the new edition, the Scherzo from the B-major Piano Trio thus became Brahms's last published scherzo – the first and last among his chamber works. The preservation of the Scherzo's genre and formal framework seems to have tied Brahms's hands as to the extent of the changes he could make in this movement in the

Trio's rewriting process. He could not deviate from the form, and the invariance of the scherzo theme implied the invariance of the main section. The thematic material of the trio was also so closely interwoven with that of the scherzo section that it would have been impossible, or at least extremely difficult, to modify this part significantly. The coda remained the only room for change.

The Scherzo is the least frequently mentioned movement in the reviews and analyses of the B-major Trio. One exception is Adolf Schubring's review of the young Brahms's works, published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1862, as part of a considerable series of articles. Schubring's text can be read as a culturally determined free association in which the demonic connotations often associated with scherzo, the interplay of human and supernatural phenomena and the 'musical uncanny' are all present. Opposing forces, counteracting and complementing each other at the same time, drive the music throughout. Moving and motionless qualities prevail at the most diverse levels of rhythmic organisation in the movement. A typical example of the cyclical connections in the B-major Trio presents itself at the meeting point of the Scherzo and the Adagio; where the Scherzo ends, the Adagio begins, both in the early work and in the rewritten version.

The slow movement of the B-major Trio contains a song, an allusion to Schubert's *Am Meer* from the *Schwanengesang* collection, written to a poem by Heinrich Heine. In Schubert's song, love consumes itself, and the lovers are still longing for togetherness while already mourning that they have to depart from each other. Brahms, by contrast, let the idyll of longing live on in the second theme of the Adagio, where dreams of love are threatened neither by grief nor by fatal passion. He adopts the song primarily as inspiration for the composition of his own song-like music: returns to its melodic core and evokes its fragments, just like recalling an inner voice or a memory. The recall of the song in the Adagio opens up space for imagination, an endless web of feelings, memories and associations. A process is taking shape that reveals further layers of its meanings when juxtaposed with images from E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story "*Johannes Kreisler's Certificate of Apprenticeship*".

Just like the song theme of the 1854 Adagio, its Allegro section is also imbued with a Hoffmannian sense of the *fantastic*. Kreisler has his say here, pushing the boundaries in his own eccentric way. The relationship between the Adagio's main section and the Allegro episode draws similar contrasts to the Variations, Op. 9, in which it is as if Brahms were the pole, and Kreisler were the one who ventures further from the ordinary with his variations – more capricious, more erratic, more extreme. Brahms is more restrained, more reflective, sometimes more resigned. The rewriting has given the Adagio a more traditional form, more homogeneous, perhaps more unified, but it has also lost much of Kreisler's imagination.

When revising the Trio, Brahms did not only make compositional decisions but also took a stand on what he wanted to remember from his youth in the late work and in what form. Rewriting can also be interpreted as a specific form of remembering – in my concluding chapter I illustrate this through the motifs of memory that emerge in the last movement. The most striking difference between the finale of the two versions is the absence of an allusion in the late work which played an essential role in early piece. The allusion in question recalls the last song ("*Nimm sie hin denn, diese Lieder*") of Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (*To the distant beloved*) song cycle. Brahms's *distant beloved* allusion can also be linked to several Schumann works that may have served as models for his composition of the 1854 finale.

Brahms did not completely integrate the allusion of the song into his own music; it seems to be present in the work as a parallel layer, partly as extraneous material. The fact that he was able to preserve the identity of the movement after the rewriting, despite the fact that he removed almost all the references to the song from the rewritten work, is an indication of the allusion's relative otherness. The finale survived the intervention, albeit with losses – but the gaps in the place of the removed material, and the traces of memory that emerge in the rewritten parts, are all reminders of the early finale in the late piece.

In the finale of the 1854 Trio, the young Brahms got close to his immediate circle of friends through a complex web of musical references and memories. Thirty-five years later, he reassessed all these allusions during the rewriting, and in 1889 created a finale in which the original piece left its mark not only through its preserved themes and musical material, but also through the hiatus left by the excised passages and the losses felt in the recomposed sections.

The ambivalence inherent in the relationship between the early and late versions of the B-major Trio is reflected in Brahms's comments on the rewritten piece. At one point he stated that he had 'just combed and tidied its hair a bit', whereas shortly afterwards he labelled the rewriting as 'castration'. The strong emotions inseparable from ambivalence also draw attention to the importance of the object of this ambivalence. Brahms could hardly have been so attracted to his youthful piece that he wanted to revise it and so tempted to destroy it at the same time if the Trio had not been particularly important to him. This importance and connection can only be expressed in a fragmentary way in the product itself, the rewritten piece, but rather be embodied in the dialogue that the fifty-six-year-old Brahms had with his twenty-year-old self, during the recomposition.

We cannot know the true richness and depth of this inner dialogue, but the characteristics, similarities and differences between the two B-major Trios reveal their essential content. A whole range of Brahms images, preserved or constructed by posterity, can be discovered in the early and late pieces: the romantic quest of Brahms-Kreisler, the 'objectivity' of the respectable composer, or the nostalgia of an artist confronted with the passing of time. I believe and I have tried to prove this in my thesis that we can come closer to understanding the two versions if we do not see the different readings of the rewriting as competing explanations that exclude each other, but as parallel stories in which there is room for contradictions and ambivalence. Even more than applying the designation 'rewriting', I find it apt to grasp the relationship between the 1854 and the 1889 versions in the same way that Brahms did: he has written his B-major Trio *once more*. The result is two different B-major Piano Trios, inseparable from each other but complete in themselves.

Publications in the subject of the thesis

„Fantázia és kreativitás: Kreisler-jegyek Brahms fiatalkori műveiben”. [“Imagination and creativity: Kreisler’s character in Brahms’s early pieces”], *Magyar Zene*, 59 (2021)/1, 78–99.

„Brahms H-dúr zongoratriójának kasztrációja: Az első tétel újraírása az 1880-as évek zenei-politikai ideológiáinak kontextusában”. [“The castration of Brahms’s B-major Piano Trio: The musical-political ideologies of the 1880s as reflected in rewriting of the first movement”], *Magyar Zene*, 58 (2020)/2, 201–216.

Other publications

„»Gall erények« – A kortárs francia zene recepciója és a francia zenéről szóló diskurzus a két világháború közötti Magyarországon”. [„»Gallic virtues« – The reception of contemporary French music and the discourse on French music in interwar Hungary”], *Magyar Zene*, 57 (2019)/4, 397–434.

Important unpublished conference papers

„Egy (zenei) emlék feldolgozása: Schumann, Brahms és a *távoli kedves*-allúzió változatai”. [“Arranging a (musical) memory: Schumann, Brahms and variations of the *distant beloved* allusion”]. Presentation at the annual conference of the Hungarian Musicological Society titled “*Transcription, arrangement, setting*” (Budapest, 9–10 October 2020).

“Meanings of change – Brahms’s musical friendships and the rewriting of his Piano Trio in B major”. Presentation at the international conference of the Croatian Musicological Society titled “*Musical Networking in the 'Long' 19th Century*” (online, 2–5 June 2021).

„Elmúlás, nosztalgia és hagyomány – Brahms temetésének zenei történetei”. [“Passing away, nostalgia and tradition – musical stories of Brahms’s funeral”]. Presentation at the conference of the Liszt Academy’s Musicology Department titled “*Music Histories from Central Europe*” (Budapest, 19–November 2021).

„Rejected and preserved memories in Brahms’s rewritten Piano Trio in B major”. Conference paper at the “*15th International Congress on Musical Signification*” (Barcelona, 15–19 June, 2022).