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## Johannes Brahms's Horn Trio and Its Unique Place in the Chamber Music Repertoire

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# Johannes Brahms's Horn Trio and Its Unique Place in the Chamber Music Repertoire

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the elements in Brahms's Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn in E-flat Major, op. 40, that contribute to its unique position in the vast and revered library of chamber music. These include Brahms's use of folksong, five-measure phrases, a variation on sonata form, developing variation, emotional elements, and unique instrumentation. The German folk song, *Es soll sich ja keiner mit der Liebe abgeben* is almost identical to the opening fourth movement theme of the horn trio. Brahms incorporates portions of this melody throughout all four movements of his horn trio which demonstrates an internal unity and cohesive use of folksong that contribute to his work's individuality. This is one of many examples of Brahms's attention to detail and use of surprising elements that allow his horn trio to stand out among thousands of other works. Through studying portions of Brahms's Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn in E-flat Major, op. 40., analyzing distinctive qualities of this work, and comparing these elements to those of other chamber works of the time, one can conclude that this piece has a unique place in the chamber music repertoire.

## Keywords

Johannes Brahms, chamber music, horn, trio, folksong, developing variation, five-measure phrase

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## Johannes Brahms's Horn Trio and Its Unique Place in the Chamber Music Repertoire

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Johannes Brahms is an esteemed composer today for a variety of works from his four symphonies to a plethora of chamber pieces. Among these is the Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn in E-flat Major, op. 40, his only chamber work for this instrumentation. While the decision to write for this unique group presented some challenges, he overcame them and created a piece that was distinct from the chamber works of his contemporaries. He maintained traditional styles and methods while incorporating innovation and change. There are many elements within Brahms's trio that enhance its individuality. Brahms utilized elements of folksong, five-measure phrases, a variation on sonata form, developing variation, emotional elements, and unique instrumentation to enhance the trio's individuality and contribute to its unique place in the chamber music repertoire.

First, Brahms utilized folksong and was attentive to its placement within the Horn Trio. Brahms used folk melodies as the melodic material for many of his vocal works, but he used portions of folk music in some of his instrumental compositions as well. Concerning op. 40, scholars have debated which German folksong was the source material for Brahms's central themes. Upon determining the specific folksong utilized in this piece, it is evident that each of the first three movement's themes were derived from the fourth movement (Finale) melodic material shown in Example 1. Identifying this folk material and his placement of main motivic elements demonstrates Brahms's unique use of folksong and enhances understanding of the overall work. Scholars such as Max Kalbeck, Brahms's friend and biographer,<sup>1</sup> have suggested a few specific folk tunes to determine the origin of the Horn Trio's lively fourth

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 21–22.

movement melody. One possible source of inspiration is the German folksong, *Es soll sich ja keiner mit der Liebe abgeben* (Example 2). It is evident that the first half of this melody is almost an exact match to the opening fourth movement theme in Example 1.<sup>2</sup>

**Example 1:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Finale, mm. 1–12.<sup>3</sup>

Example 1 shows two staves of music in 8/8 time. The first staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and ends with a *cresc.* marking. The second staff begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and includes a section marked 'A'.

**Example 2:** *Es soll sich ja keiner mit der Liebe abgeben*, mm. 1–4.<sup>4</sup>

Example 2 shows a single staff of music in 3/4 time with German lyrics underneath:

Es soll sich ja kei-ner mit der Lie-be ab-ge-ben, Heut  
 Sie brächt ja so man-che schö-ne Ker-le um's Le-ben.

Brahms changed the rhythm to eighth notes, wrote in a different key, and decided to omit one ornamental note, but otherwise, the notes are precisely the same as the first section of the folk tune. While this tune seems the most likely inspiration behind Brahms's fourth movement theme, Kalbeck and Notley have suggested the folksong *Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus* as another possible origin (Example 3).

**Example 3:** *Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus*, mm. 1–8.<sup>5</sup>

Example 3 shows two staves of music in 3/4 time with German lyrics underneath:

Dort in den Wei - den steht ein Haus, steht ein Haus,  
 steht ein Haus, da schaut die Magd zum Fen - ster 'nhaus, zum Fen - ster 'nhaus!

While *Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus* contains the opening interval of a fourth and a similar melodic contour, most of the melodic material

<sup>2</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 22.

<sup>3</sup> Brahms, *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn*, Finale, mm. 1–12.

<sup>4</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 22.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 21.

seems to be another theme entirely. Additionally, this suggested folk tune is in a minor key while Brahms's theme is major, and *Dort in den Weiden* relies on a characteristic neighbor tone from D to E-flat that is not found in Brahms's melody. Based on these dissimilar characteristics, it is clear that *Dort in den Weiden* does not contain enough resemblance to Brahms's theme to be considered a close rival to *Es soll*.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it can be stated almost without doubt that *Es soll sich ja keiner mit der Liebe abgeben* was the inspiration for Brahms's melody.

Folksong influence is found frequently in pieces by Brahms's contemporaries, and it is certainly not uncommon in Brahms's own works. However, he refrains from utilizing the full folksong until the fourth movement of his Horn Trio. The location of this melody is noteworthy because a large portion of Romantic era works derive the main themes of each movement from the first movement material. Evidence suggests that the fourth movement folk theme is the primary thematic idea throughout the work, and portions of the first three movements hinted at the Finale's motivic material all along. This observation reveals an internal unity within each section that is not derived from the first movement as was more commonly the case, but from the fourth movement. Comparing the first four measures of the Finale theme (Example 4) with mm. 59–62 of the third movement (Example 5) demonstrates this assertion.

**Example 4:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Finale, mm. 1–4, violin only.<sup>7</sup>



**Example 5:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Adagio mesto, mm. 59–62.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 21.

<sup>7</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 20.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 20.

The melodic contour of the first two measures of the Adagio movement contains the same notes from B<sub>2</sub> to B<sub>3</sub> in the same key as the Finale. This portion of the Adagio is only missing four notes which are repeated eighth notes in the Finale. Therefore, the lines shown in the examples above are very similar. He continues to present portions of the motive throughout the work in each movement, so the listener is quite familiar with the melody by the Finale. The fourth movement's main melody from *Es soll sich ja keiner mit der Liebe abgeben* is the linchpin of the entire work's thematic material. Brahms used the placement of the principal theme in a creative way compared to his contemporaries.

Further evidence of Brahms's creative use of folk melody is found in the apparent hunting-horn style of the second and fourth movements. Hunting-horn style is characterized by duple meters, quick tempos, and German folksong, which are all present in these two movements.<sup>9</sup> *Non-legato* articulation, ascending and descending stepwise motion, and the horn call itself are additional components that allude to hunting-horn calls.<sup>10</sup> While written with 3/4 time signature, the second movement is very quick and felt in one with four eight-bar phrases, so it has a duple feel. The hunting call consists of perfect fourths, and they are present in the melody in both violin and horn.<sup>11</sup> The hunting-horn style is a possible extramusical reason Brahms chose to incorporate a German folk melody in this trio. Listeners of his day would associate the horn calls with hunting and nature, so they would have understood the reference immediately. Furthermore, *Es soll* would have likely been familiar to Romantic era audiences since it is thought to have been published in a collection of German folk tunes between 1838 and 1840.<sup>12</sup> These recognizable elements may have piqued audiences' interest in his Horn Trio. Overall, Brahms's decision to save the full iteration of the folksong until the Finale and his use of the hunting-horn style allow this piece to stand out from other Romantic era works.

Another unique element of Brahms's Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn is his use of the five-measure phrase. This intentional method of phrasing contributes to the emotional feeling of the movement. In his piano Intermezzo in C-sharp Minor, op. 117, no. 3, he utilized the text of a German poem, *O weh, o weh, hinab ins Thal*. This tune would only

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<sup>9</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 9.

<sup>10</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 22.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 22.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, "Multifaceted Brahms."

require four measures to flow well by nature of the established poetic meter created by the German text. Thus, in order to form a five-measure phrase, the portion of the text, *den Berg hinan*, is repeated in Brahms's piano Intermezzo in C-sharp Minor.<sup>13</sup> The use of a fifth measure was a common practice for Brahms that Scott Murphy described as “wonderfully strange,”<sup>14</sup> and it can be seen in many of his other compositions. The third movement of Brahms's Horn Trio, Adagio mesto, opens with a five-measure phrase in the horn, violin, and piano as shown in Example 6. To the listener, the first two bars set up a typical four-measure phrase, so the extra measure comes as a surprise.

**Example 6:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Adagio mesto, mm. 5–9.<sup>15</sup>

After the initial theme, the next melodic passage also consists of a five-measure phrase. Notice in Example 7 that the melody begins in the horn (bottom line), and it starts in the violin two measures later with slight variation. The horn enters by itself, and these two measures are quite slow and somber yet contain an element of suspense. This five-measure phrase gives the sense of holding on which engages the audience in a powerful way, especially for an Adagio tempo marking.

**Example 7:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Adagio mesto, mm. 19–25.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ng, “Oddness,” 117.

<sup>14</sup> Ng, “Oddness,” 134.

<sup>15</sup> Brahms, *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn*, Adagio mesto, mm. 5–9.

<sup>16</sup> Brahms, *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn*, Adagio mesto, mm. 19–25.

The movement is quite sorrowful, and this choice of phrasing prolongs the suspended dissonance. Also, it contributes to a sense of unrest and questioning at the end of the phrase which continues throughout the movement. Brahms's decision to add an additional bar enhances the tone of grief in the movement, and this phrase extension's tonal, rhythmic, and expressive parts play a vital role in the theme's makeup and meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Another element that contributes to the emotional nature of the movement is the group of rhythmic units in the opening four measures of the piano part. This descending rhythmic line is also present in some of Brahms's other works, such as the third movement of his Second Piano Concerto, op. 83, and his *Sechs Gesänge* (Six Songs), op. 6, no. 2. As JongKyun Kim states in his master's thesis, "This figure resembles a slow walk towards death, in which one gradually loses the energy and willingness to live."<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested that Brahms wrote this work either in memory of his recently deceased mother or while pondering the conclusion of a love affair with Agathe von Siebold. Regardless of which explanation is correct, most agree that "the third movement is one of the most deeply felt and delicately written of all of Brahms's slow movements,"<sup>19</sup> and the choice to use the five-measure phrase enhances those feelings of sorrow and grief. As Murphy observes, "The linear progression bestows on the five-measure phrase a radically different expressive profile than the four-measure model."<sup>20</sup>

Brahms's use of the five-measure phrase often resulted in metrical displacement, or the obscuring of notes within the bar lines of a time signature. Arnold Schoenberg called attention to this method in his essay, "Brahms the Progressive" and was known to rebar some of Brahms's phrases in order to demonstrate the concept.<sup>21</sup> John Walter Hill explains an example from the fourth movement of the Horn Trio in the following way: "The motto of the finale is slightly decorated and metrically displaced—in typical Brahmsian fashion—but nevertheless unequivocally recognisable in the second half-phrase of the second movement."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ng, "Oddness," 120.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 18.

<sup>19</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ng, "Oddness," 117.

<sup>21</sup> Frisch, "Shifting Bar Line," 139.

<sup>22</sup> Hill, "Thematic Transformation," 21.



Portions of movement three of the Horn Trio contain this metric conflict. While notated in 6/8, the phrase being passed between the horn and the violin seems to be in 9/8.

**Example 8:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Adagio mesto, mm. 27–31.<sup>23</sup>

The image shows a musical score for three staves: Horn, Violin, and Piano. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 6/8. The Horn and Violin parts play a five-measure phrase that feels like 9/8 time. The Piano part plays syncopations that create a hemiola with the other instruments. Dynamics include *p*, *dim.*, and *pp*. There is an '8...' above the piano staff in the first measure.

Although these measures are written in a duple time signature, it feels as though they are in a triple meter, and this gives the effect of conflict. Simultaneously, the piano is playing syncopations that create a hemiola with the horn and violin line. As opposed to changing the phrase lengths, Brahms altered the metrical structure.<sup>24</sup> For the audience, this would cause the perceived meter to be different from the actual written meter. Schoenberg was the first to identify this practice, and he believed that it “comprises a fundamental and innovative aspect of Brahms’s art.”<sup>25</sup> In addition to the five-measure phrase, metrical displacement was an uncommon element and contributes to the Horn Trio’s special place in chamber music repertoire.

In Brahms’s day, chamber music was often composed with a sonata form as the first movement. However, since Brahms wrote the first movement of his Horn Trio without a development, it is not a typical sonata form. Scholars debate between calling this movement a rondo form or a variant on the sonata form since it contains elements of both musical structures. Many classify it as having an A-B-A’-B’-A” form, so it is very similar to a rondo form because it includes a returning restatement of material

<sup>23</sup> Brahms, *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn*, Adagio mesto, mm. 27–31.

<sup>24</sup> Frisch, “Shifting Bar Line,” 141.

<sup>25</sup> Frisch, “Shifting Bar Line,” 140.

from the beginning of the piece.<sup>26</sup> This theme and its parts recur in different keys and durations, making a strong argument for the rondo form. Of all Brahms's twenty-four chamber works, this is the only one that diverges from the conventional sonata form.<sup>27</sup> His sonata-without-development form occurs in the first movement which is mostly slow in tempo, and the expected allegro does not arrive until the second movement. Some of his contemporaries also varied the sonata form or deviated from it; however, their first movements were often fast, and their second movements were slow. Clearly, the unique treatment of the first movement as well as the reversed standard tempi for the first and second movements assert the individuality of Brahms's Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn.

Another component found in Brahms's works is the principle of developing variation. This specific term was first used by Schoenberg in his essay to describe a principle of composition. He defined it as an alteration of themes or motives throughout a segment or the entirety of the work. This was also termed 'organic' music since it did not use exact repetitions of the theme. Schoenberg elaborated, "This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression and every needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the *idea* of the piece."<sup>28</sup> Brahms utilizes the same rhythmic patterns and interval relationships in different ways to construct a theme in a way that is still recognizable to the audience, and this is a rare form of sequential writing that his contemporaries did not often use.<sup>29</sup> This technique is present in each movement of the Horn Trio, but here the first movement will be highlighted. In Example 9, the first eight measures of the piece contain a fifth from the B-flat to the F, embellish the F, center briefly around C and B-flat, and end back on the F. Example 10 also centers around B-flat and F with half-step suspensions.

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<sup>26</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 7–8.

<sup>27</sup> Kim, "Fundamental Unity," 7–8.

<sup>28</sup> Frisch, *Brahms*, 1–2.

<sup>29</sup> Frisch, *Brahms*, 2–3.

**Example 9:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Andante, mm. 1–8.<sup>30</sup>



**Example 10:** Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn, op. 40, Andante, mm. 16–22.<sup>31</sup>

These two melodies are based on the same pitches and intervals and have related rhythm. Brahms continues this pattern throughout the first movement with this melodic material being passed to the horn and back to the violin. As an audience member, these differences in thematic material are recognizable in a way that reminds the listener of the previous melodies. This is just one of many examples of developing variation in the Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn that differ from other chamber works of the day and add to the growing reasons why this work stands out in the chamber music repertoire.

Extramusical meaning can be difficult to identify, but it is an aspect sometimes included in music that can enrich the quality of a piece. After the publication of Brahms's first chamber work, he continued to insert allusions to prominent moments and life events into his works. It is well known that Brahms had a friendship with both Robert and Clara Schumann, and some of their interactions influenced elements of Brahms's compositions. He was inspired by Robert Schumann's music, so Brahms's works occasionally nod to Schumann's own compositional

<sup>30</sup> Brahms, *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn*, Andante, mm. 1–8.

<sup>31</sup> Brahms, *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn*, Andante, mm. 16–22.

style.<sup>32</sup> Brahms had loved Clara even though she was married to Robert. It has been theorized that Brahms could have alluded to this “distant beloved” in his pieces.<sup>33</sup> This reference to Clara is an example of extramusical meaning that can be identified in many of Brahms’s works including his Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn in E-flat Major, op. 40.

As previously mentioned, some suggest the German song *Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus* as the basis of some of the Horn Trio’s themes because Brahms’s mother used to sing it. As shown above, it is much more likely that *Es soll sich ja keiner mit der Liebe abgeben* is the German folksong used. Without *Dort in den Weiden* as evidence, it is difficult to defend the claim that the work was written in memory of his mother. Conversely, the Horn Trio was completed in 1865 which was the same year his String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, op. 36 was finished. Although his affair with Miss Agathe von Siebold occurred six years prior to the finalization of these works, his String Sextet contains explicit references to her by spelling out her name in the first movement themes. While this cannot be confirmed as accurately in the Horn Trio as it could in his String Sextet, it is likely that the joy felt in the second movement and anguish expressed in the third refer to the happiness he felt and the sorrow he endured when their relationship ended.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrates Brahms’s connection to music and events of a person’s life in a tangible and emotional way. While many composers base their works on life experiences, Brahms writes in a way that is extremely emotive and moving to the audience. Listeners do not need explicit knowledge of Brahms’s extramusical inspiration to feel moments of jubilation or sorrow.

Finally, instrumentation is the most evident distinctive feature of Brahms’s Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn. To this day, there are very few trios for this instrumentation. Long after Brahms, György Ligeti (1982) and Eric Ewazen (2014) each wrote a notable trio for piano, violin, and horn that were inspired by Brahms’s instrumentation. In the Classical era, Haydn wrote a trio for horn, violin, and cello, but aside from these three examples, it is quite uncommon to have horn and violin in a trio together. Following the publication of this piece, Brahms received criticism from composers and journalists such as Selmar Bagge who said this was not chamber music but an “occasional piece” due to

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<sup>32</sup> Sholes, *Allusion*, 68–69.

<sup>33</sup> Sholes, *Allusion*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Hill, “Thematic Transformation,” 22–23.

its questionable instrumentation.<sup>35</sup> This was the first time the horn was used outside of brass and woodwind ensembles, so some were opposed to this trio. However, many were fond of the unusual sound of the horn with the violin, and piano as they present an innovative combination of timbre. It is important to note that this trio was written for the natural or ‘hand’ horn. This means that there is an inconsistency in tone quality between notes in the horn part since some notes are completely stopped with the hand, some are partially stopped, and some are open. His choice to use the natural horn instead of a cello was likely personal since his father played the horn professionally and taught him how to play it as well. Additionally, it was a significant decision because at that point in history, the valve horn had been developed and popularized, almost completely overtaking its predecessor.

Brahms’s choice to compose for the hand horn brought advantages and disadvantages, but overall, it contributed positively to the work. The natural horn brings about distinct tone colors and forms in this trio arrangement. Brahms composed each movement in the key of E-flat which allows only one crook to be used on the natural horn, so this limited the range and notes that were possible. Also, he may have chosen to create the first movement as a sonata without development form due to the natural horn’s inability to utilize any ‘foreign’ key areas without half stopping the notes. This resulted in unique differences in timbral quality between notes that adds character and charm to this powerful work. Additionally, the natural horn creates a more somber and melancholic sound which suits the serious nature of the piece. Call and response melodic segments between the violin and horn were incorporated brilliantly with this unique arrangement of instruments.

While his original trio called for the natural horn, this instrument is no longer commonly used since the valve horn is played almost exclusively due to its many advantages. Brahms’s utilization of the valve horn instead of the hand horn creates some balance challenges with a string and modern brass instrument sharing equal roles in a trio.<sup>36</sup> If performed with natural horn, balance is not a large issue, but with the valve horn, the hornist must hold back their volume a bit for the violin to be heard. If addressed in rehearsals, this concern can mostly be resolved, so it does not detract heavily from the piece’s overall effect. Balance should not be a problem critiqued in Brahms’s writing since this problem arises with

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<sup>35</sup> Botstein, *Compleat Brahms*, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Botstein, *Compleat Brahms*, 106–107.

the use of the modern horn instead of the instrument he intended. His decision to call for the hand horn was distinctive during his day, and it is being recognized as the more accurate way to perform this work today. Despite potential obstacles on either horn, performers can effectively prepare this piece on both instruments for a magnificent performance. Overall, the beautiful and lush sounds and colors produced by the violin, piano, and horn and Brahms's decision to compose for the natural horn are both unparalleled components that contribute to the individuality of this chamber piece.

Johannes Brahms has written a substantial amount of chamber works, but few are as unique as the Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn in E-flat Major, op. 40. Techniques such as his choice to base the piece's themes on the fourth movement material, the utilization of five-measure phrases, variation on sonata form, extra-musical meaning and uncommon instrumentation demonstrate his knowledge of traditional and contemporary techniques and styles. As a result, this work is a standard part of advanced and professional horn players' repertoire. Overall, these elements of Brahms's Trio for Piano, Violin, and Horn in E-flat Major, op. 40 allow it to have a special place in the chamber music repertoire that is still celebrated today.

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