

## Desire, Repression & Brahms's First Symphony

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### I.

Once again, our timing is off. The very idea of a sexual hermeneutic for the work of art—an idea still quite new and unsettling for academic musicologists—has lately threatened to become rather, well, passé. Consider, for example, a highly symptomatic passage in A. S. Byatt's 1990 novel, *Possession*. A semisatiric "romance" set in contemporary academia, it features a pair of young scholars engaged in tracking down the hidden literary love affair between two Victorian poets. At one point Byatt forces her hero (and the reader) to slog through a dead-on parody of pedantic feminist criticism: the invented quotation, featuring a wooden and literal mapping of the female poet's landscape imagery onto the contours of the female genitalia, is complete with obligatory references to Irigaray and Cixous, Willa Cather, and the "vegetable cycle of lettuce." His reaction:

Roland laid aside Leonora Stern with a small sigh. He had a vision of the land they were about to explore, covered with sucking human orifices and knotted human body hair. He did not like this vision, and yet, a child of his time, found it compelling, somehow guaranteed to be significant...Sexuality was like thick smoked glass; everything took on the same blurred tint through it.<sup>1</sup>

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1. A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (New York, 1990), 267-68; emphasis mine.

Byatt appears to have caught the academic zeitgeist remarkably well. Compare her authorial intervention with this passage from a current musicological journal:

A sexual premise or motive for tonal music could easily be granted, of course, but not as a monopoly...it would remain but a premise, something subterranean and largely ineffective above ground....Even when supplemented with male and female stereotypes, images of sex and sexuality are too remote and hence too imprecise (indeed, as I sometimes imagine, too blunt and corny) to be of any assistance in coming to terms with the inexhaustible details of musical structure and expression.<sup>2</sup>

The speaker here is Pieter van den Toorn, taking issue in *The Journal of Musicology* with the feminist criticism of, among others, Susan McClary.

It will become abundantly clear by the end of this essay that van den Toorn and I hardly see eye-to-eye on this subject; there is, however, a grain of truth in these complaints. If, emboldened by the feminist critique, we investigate a canonical piece like Brahms's First Symphony with an eye towards its sexual politics, we find a rich field of untapped significance—the symphony is obsessed with sexual desire, wrestling with it, literally *drenched* in it—but only indifferent structural correspondence with the specific relationships sketched out by McClary in “Sexual Politics in Classical Music.”<sup>3</sup> The mechanistic, overly literal transference of structures that Byatt satirizes is an ever-present danger. In careless or naive hands, the sexual metaphor does have the potential to *blur things*—to, as van den Toorn rather melodramatically warns, “tyrannize music.” But this is not because human sexuality is too crude and undifferentiated, or because sexuality has nothing to do with music; it is because the constructions of gendered sexuality we tend to

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2. Pieter van den Toorn, “Feminism, Politics, and Contemporary Music Theory,” *Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991): 290; emphasis mine.

3. Susan McClary, in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota, 1991), 53-79.

apply to music are often just too simple. The solution is *not* to abandon the metaphor, but to refine it.

Thus the basic task is to reconsider the epistemological relation of sexuality, sexual politics, and sonata form. My goal is to propose a more flexible mapping of human sexual relationships onto sonata form—a mapping informed by the full complexity of psychoanalytic theories of sexuality. To do this, however, I am going to turn the musical hermeneutic spawned by sexual politics back on itself in an attempt to loosen up potential applications. By way of “evidence” for a revised sexual politics of the sonata, I want to advance a reading of Brahms’s First Symphony that will be doubly subversive. The symphony does encode a sexual drama, but it is a solipsistic one, concerned almost exclusively with the dysfunction of *male* sexuality—and detours into repression, fixation, and neurotic anxiety.

## II.

So, where to begin (re)construction? Allow me to recapitulate briefly McClary’s theory of the basic structural relations behind the sexual politics of sonata form.<sup>4</sup> The form is conceptualized as a dramatic conflict, in which the two antagonists are the two theme groups. In an extrapolation from nineteenth-century critical description and structuralist theories of literary narrative, the first theme group is understood to signify “the masculine” and the second, “the feminine.”

The relation of gendered subjects and objects to sexuality is encoded in the relationship of these themes to tonality. Tonal stability, both local and global, is the sonata’s encoding of sexual control—the power to command, and transcend sexual desire. Since we have learned to desire tonal closure in tonal music, we inevitably invest in the “triumph” of the tonic and its

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4. *Ibid.*, 69-78.

masculine theme over the multileveled chromatic sexual threat embodied in the feminine theme.

Actually, the tonal portion of this structure fits Brahms's First quite well. The symphony's outer movements are clearly centered on C, but never without the constant encroachment of chromatic, disruptive themes and harmonies. We hear a violent conflict between diatonic and chromatic elements that cries out for interpretation. And, given the general hermeneutic of half- and whole-steps in common-practice music (we will get into specifics later), why *not* an explicitly sexual reading?

The trouble arises when we try to hook this tonal conflict up to gendered characteristic themes. How are we to account for the inconvenient fact that the first movement of op. 68 is obsessively monothematic? There is no real "second theme," since the lyrical material that appears in the secondary key is all explicitly derived from first theme group material. *All* of the themes in this movement are in fact derived from the first bars of the Allegro. It appears that, not secure enough to triumph over female sexual desire, Brahms has backed away from the threatening subject altogether.

Thus the direct application of our model seems less than propitious: with no female theme upon which to displace tonal (read: sexual) conflict, the power struggle rages *within* the tonic first theme group, which displays none of the vaunted male control and stability—tonal or otherwise. The movement's most brutal and desperate attempts to repress disruptive chromaticism occur in the opening period of the exposition and at the moment of recapitulation—just where one would expect serene masculine assurance.

Should we then abandon the construction of masculinity and sexuality in Brahms's music? No—better to reexamine Brahms's *masculinity*, and his relation to sexuality. We will need to mount a double attack against monolithic interpretation of Brahms's first theme group. One will be hermeneutic, as we try to establish sexual meanings we can apply with confidence to

a.

b.

Example 1 consists of two parts, a and b. Part a shows two musical staves. The left staff is in G major (one flat) and the right staff is in D major (two sharps). Both staves feature a rising chromatic line in the upper voice and a contrary chromatic line in the lower voice. A bracket above the right staff spans the first two measures, and a 'V?' label is placed below the second measure. Part b shows two staves. The left staff is in D major (two sharps) and the right staff is in G major (one flat). The left staff is labeled 'Wagner' and the right staff is labeled '"Brahms"'. Both staves feature a rising chromatic line in the upper voice and a contrary chromatic line in the lower voice. A bracket above the right staff spans the first two measures.

Example 1

Brahms's motivic material; the other will be psychoanalytic, as we trace those motives through a classically Freudian dynamic.

### III.

Consider example 1a; in it I force a slightly seditious comparison between the rising chromatic gesture that opens Brahms's exposition and the infamous sexually charged opening of *Tristan und Isolde*. Placed side by side, their voice leading resemblance is inescapable: a single, rising chromatic line is harmonized by contrary chromatic motion below; the chromatic motion ends in a major third; the entire configuration finishes up on a dominant. Played side by side, their sonic kinship is clear; they even can be ever so slightly manipulated to form a creditable antecedent-consequent phrase (ex. 1b).

The interpretive implications are equally clear: by linking Brahms's theme to the nineteenth century's clearest semiotic

depiction of lust, we open what Lawrence Kramer has called a “hermeneutic window.”<sup>5</sup> One might argue that Wagner’s sexual sign is at least somewhat iconic—i.e., most within our interpretive community would agree that it has the “shape” of musical desire—and its significance should transfer to anything that is shaped like it. I would argue that Brahms’s crucial and ubiquitous motive also stands for sexual desire—and, given its place in the sonata form, *masculine* sexual desire. The vast difference in sound between the two themes indexes the vastly different ideological role sexual desire plays within these two artworks.

There is also the strong probability that Brahms’s chromatic theme is an actual quotation—conscious or unconscious—of *Tristan*.<sup>6</sup> Had Brahms heard music from *Tristan* at the time he was writing his first symphony movement? The earliest documented references to the First Symphony are to this first movement, which was evidently written fourteen years earlier than the rest: Clara Schumann quotes the Allegro theme in a letter to Joachim on 1 July 1862, and Albert Dietrich remembered seeing the finished movement sometime in the summer of 1862, just before Brahms moved to Vienna and actually met Wagner.<sup>7</sup>

If Brahms was working on the First Symphony in 1861–62, then *Tristan* was very much in the air during its conception. Wagner finished the score in August of 1859, and Breitkopf & Härtel rushed it into print to recoup expenses, producing full

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5. Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley, 1990), 6, 9–10.

6. The discussion below is based on various biographical sources, most notably Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1921); Berthold Litzmann, ed., *Clara Schumann—Johannes Brahms: Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–1896*, 2 vols. (Leipzig 1927; English trans. London, 1927); and R. Bailey, ed., *Richard Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from Tristan und Isolde* (New York, 1985).

7. See Kalbeck III, 92; there is no mention in either the letters or Kalbeck of *any* symphony in progress before July 1862.

and vocal scores (plus a separate concert version of the Prelude) by 13 January 1860. The Prelude had already been premiered in Prague by von Bülow on 12 March 1859; further performances followed, most notably one in Paris (25 January 1860) that was reviewed by Berlioz. *Tristan* was at least nominally “in production” at the Vienna Court Opera from May 1861 to late 1863; a public orchestra rehearsal for Princess Metternich in November 1861 put plans—and gossip—into high gear.

During this time Brahms was based in Hamburg, but concertizing all over Germany; one of his publishers was none other than Breitkopf & Härtel.<sup>8</sup> It does not seem unlikely that he ran into a score of *Tristan*, if not a performance: simple curiosity might well have made him search it out. The next year, he was interested enough in Wagner to help copy out parts for the older composer’s Viennese benefit concert of 26 December 1862. Actually, an illustrated reference in a journal, or an acquaintance stepping over to the piano to demonstrate “that chord” would have sufficed to forge an association. Brahms made no documented reference to *Tristan* at this time; most likely the influence, if any, functioned on an unconscious level, like the “inconsequential” and forgotten material from waking life that plays such an important role in the construction of dream symbolism.

Whether it is a conscious allusion, unconscious influence, or just a fortuitous convergence of expressive resources, I can see two objections that immediately arise to reading Brahms’s chromatic motive as sexual desire, and implicating the tonic first theme group in its transgressions. One is formal, the other, phenomenological. Formally one could argue, in defense of a unified masculine presence, that this chromatic theme is *not* in fact part of the first theme group, but a “motto” theme, like the brass fanfare in the Tchaikovsky Fourth. And, as in Susan McClary’s reading of that symphony, it might encode a force

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8. Brahms visited the firm’s home city of Leipzig on a concert tour in September 1861.

conceptualized as outside both male and female protagonists. Thus the "real" first theme would be example 2, a perfect specimen of the triadic, upward-leaping signifier of musical masculinity.

The "motto" objection is easily dismissed. Tchaikovsky's fanfare is "outside" simply because it does not appear at all inside either theme group of the exposition, nor does it mix with them; Brahms's desire theme is integral to both. But our attention is quite rightly called to this other motive, so obviously contrasting in character. Does it fit into the sexual hermeneutic under construction? Consider example 3a, the famous F-A-F theme. This stands, as we know, for Brahms's gender-separatist motto "*Frei aber froh*," coined in opposition to Joseph Joachim's more romantic F-A-E, "*Frei aber einsam*." If F-A-F is interpreted in the minor (ex. 3b), it becomes 3-5-3 of d—and thus emerges the transpositional connection to the 3-5-3-5 of the First Symphony (ex. 3c).<sup>9</sup> It does not seem forced to read Brahms's first theme group as a conflict between rampant sexual desire (the chromatic motto), and the denial of that same desire (the transposed F-A-F).

To take stock: we have arrived at a hermeneutic point familiar in the gendered reading of absolute forms. We have identified two contrasting musical motives as representing disruptive sexual desire and the opposed ability to control and transcend that desire. But I would call attention to two significant idiosyncracies in my reading. First, I have not relied only on the existence of general (and generally accepted) nineteenth-century musical codes for sexual control and sexual

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9. This connection was first noted by Kalbeck (I, 235; III, 93); he calls F-A-F one of Brahms's *Urmotiven*, and adduces its occurrence in op. 68 as evidence for the symphony's genesis as far back as 1855—which would, of course, place the inspiration for the work directly within the most heated moments of the Johannes-Clara romance. An 1855 genesis for the movement would also eliminate any possible *Tristan* influence on op. 68 (but more on the interesting hermeneutic conclusions Kalbeck drew from this speculative redating in due course).



Example 2

a. F A F  
*frei aber froh*

b. 3 5 3

c. 3 5 3 5  
F A F (A)

Example 3

abandon—though they do apply. Instead, I have tried to buttress the chromatic-diatonic stereotype with interpretive links more overt and specific to this piece and time.

The more critical deviation, however, is structural: both of these motives are in the first theme group, ruled by the tonic, and thus typed as different aspects of the masculine. It seems that we are witness to a struggle for sexual control not between male and female, but within one male psyche, divided against itself. As we investigate the mechanisms by which this nineteenth-century Viennese psychic struggle manifests itself in music, what better framework than that provided by Sigmund Freud?

#### IV.

As a way of getting into the Freudian dynamic at work in this symphony, let me return to answer the other, more pressing objection that could be raised against reading its chromatic

motto as sexual desire. As I said, one might object phenomenologically: the C-C<sup>#</sup>-D, as it first appears in the exposition (mm. 38-42) just doesn't sound very *sexy*. Now there *are* points in Brahms's First where the chromatic motto approaches the sensuous sound-world of *Tristan* much more closely: most obviously, the passionate slow introduction, with its throbbing strings and pounding timpani.

This will not help to explain the gruff, abrupt way the motto is handled in its central appearance as the first theme of the sonata form. In fact, the lyricism of the slow introduction merely makes the Allegro sound *more* unpleasant; clearly the function and meaning of this motto is very different from Wagner's. The opening bears the traces of a bitter mental struggle. *Tristan* will function as a useful structural foil: after its opening chromatic gesture settles on a dominant seventh, Wagner lets the chord fade away into silence—nine slow beats into which chromatically depicted desire can expand. And, of course, there is no cadence. Brahms gives *his* desire no room to expand: he provides the cadential progression that Wagner withholds—and what a brutally simple and functional fifth-progression it is! There is a desperation in the way Brahms wrenches that motto theme back to the tonic.

What is the significance of this passage? McClary has described a similar arbitrary imposition of the tonic in a Mozart concerto as a "lobotomy."<sup>10</sup> I would argue that mm. 38-42 are the psychoanalytic equivalent of *self*-lobotomy: they are the musical dramatization not of untrammelled sexual desire, but of a primal act of sexual *repression*. Freud defines repression as "*the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness.*"<sup>11</sup> What could be a better musical depiction of that func-

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10. Susan McClary, "A Musical Dialectic for the Enlightenment: Mozart's Piano Concerto in G major, K. 453, Movement 2," *Cultural Critique* 5 (1986): 129-69.

11. Sigmund Freud, "Repression" (1915), in *General Psychoanalytic Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1963), 105; emphasis mine.

tion than Brahms's willful cadence? His sonata form begins with an act of denial: by denying the chromatic passion of the slow introduction—trying to keep it from entering the Allegro—Brahms attempts to establish control over sexual desire. Repression as a psychological and a discursive strategy dominates this theme, and through it, the symphony.

But before we can read the symphony as a tale of repression, we must decide how repression can be mirrored in musical discourse. In the following discussion, I will be using Freud's 1915 article "Repression" to draw some general parallels.

A crucial feature of Freudian repression is that it is not an isolated act, but a process. There is a *primal act* of repression, whereby the idea of satisfying an instinct (the "instinct-presentation") becomes too painful for the conscious mind to accept, and is pushed away into the unconscious. But the instinct-presentation does not disappear; it is merely released from conscious control. It freely mutates, and takes on extreme and often threatening forms of expression.

Thus repression requires a constant effort, as unpleasant derivatives of the buried instinct-presentation are always threatening to break through into consciousness. Freud describes the way that these transformations arise in a manner strikingly akin to the process of thematic development in music:

If these derivatives are sufficiently far removed from the repressed instinct-presentation, *whether owing to the process of distortion or by reason of the number of intermediate associations*, they have free access to consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Freud might be describing a psychoanalytic form of "developing variation." Brahms's obsessive treatment of the first movement's chromatic motto theme is a perfect musical analog for the behavior of an instinct under repression: it does not disappear after m. 42, but is constantly bubbling up through the

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12. *Ibid.*, 107; emphasis mine.

texture in more or less threatening ways. The unusual tightness of the thematic web in this movement is testimony to—or maybe a depiction of—the power of repressed desire to force its way to the surface.

The other critical aspect of repression is a split between the actual idea or image that is pushed out of consciousness, and the emotional “charge” or *cathexis* with which it is invested. Even if the image (or musical motive, in our case) is eliminated or transformed altogether, the libidinal energy associated with it is not thereby discharged. The most common fate of this instinctive energy is transformation into *anxiety*. This insight may help to explain what Dahlhaus has called the “gloomy, harsh, tragic aspect” of Brahms’s style, at least in this symphony.<sup>13</sup> Free-floating anxiety is the dominant affect of his grim first movement—an edge of hysteria only restrained (as it would be in a neurotic patient) by a transformational obsession.

## V.

Now we are ready to see how the hermeneutics of sexual thematic conflict and the mechanisms of repression combine in specific passages of Brahms’s symphony. I will concentrate on four pivotal moments in the formal drama for close reading.

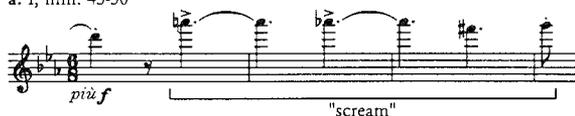
### I. Movement I: First Theme Group (mm. 38-89)

Not surprisingly, the opening gesture of repression in mm. 38-42 is only the first move in a pitched battle that drives Brahms to fill his score with constant exhortations to more and more effort—*forte, più forte, crescendo, fortissimo, pesante!* In the very next bars, the “*frei aber froh*” theme bounds up and down in a symmetrical four-bar phrase that outlines I and V. But its control of the texture is undercut by the

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13. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 254 (figure caption).

a. I, mm. 45-50



b. I, mm. 84-89



c. IV, mm. 431ff.



## Example 4

desire theme lurking in the accompaniment below. *Frei aber froh* makes another attempt to establish itself a fifth higher in G minor, but the G-G<sup>#</sup>-A of desire still stalks along underneath it. This time, the F-A-F theme disintegrates under the pressure—its periodic structure becomes “unbalanced.” The neat downward consequent disappears, replaced by a hysterical scream high in the violins (ex. 4a).

The angular, syncopated outburst sounds bizarre, like a neurotic symptom. It *is* one—a neurotic defense mechanism, which by *inverting* the chromatic motive (G-G<sup>#</sup>-A becomes A-A<sup>b</sup>-[F<sup>#</sup>]-G) *denies* it, and drags the harmonic progression back to the home dominant. In one way this wild gesture is a neat musical analog of a reaction-formation, but it really functions more like a *phobia*: more and more of the piece’s anxiety begins to focus around the pitches A and A<sup>b</sup>

sounding and re-sounding (as we shall see) in that hysterical—quite literally “high-strung”—register.

The rest of this opening period can be read as a series of ever-stronger attacks by repressed desire on conscious control—that is, on tonal and rhythmic stability. As the desire theme tries to constitute itself, the musical texture is repeatedly led astray by the encroachment of its chromatic contrary motion, leading to strikingly irrational enharmonic slippages from C. Even worse, a rhythmic instability latent in the desire motto, and mirrored in its phobic A-A<sup>b</sup> “reaction,” threatens to take over the texture altogether. The “feminine” upbeat phrasing and incipient chromaticism of mm. 51-55 must be denied by macho horns and drums at m. 57.

Measures 59-68 present a more comprehensive threat: transformations of the chromatic motto rise and fall in the strings; the motto’s voice-leading overpowers the harmonic progression with chromatic contrary motion between woodwinds and bass; the tonality veers through C-flat and F-flat; the downbeat disappears. Brahms reasserts control at mm. 69-70—but just barely. The new repressive gesture sounds even more arbitrary and abrupt than the opening it echoes: Brahms simply wades into the chaos, plants a *fortissimo* V7/C chord on the upbeat, and uses it to muscle the music around to a *masculine* downbeat cadence on the tonic. Now F-A-F repeats three times in the winds, as if nerving itself up—it does ultimately achieve a longer consequent and a half-cadence in C—but cannot prevent the desire motto from providing a slippery, disruptive bass line. At m. 78 the voices switch instrumentation; the F-A-F theme now leaps up *five successive times* in the strings—an obsessive-compulsive attempt to ward off the desire theme, whose chromaticism is cutting more and more penetratingly through the texture, first in the high woodwinds, then in the lower strings.

The crescendo of anxiety in this passage coalesces into another phobic scream, even wilder than mm. 48-50 (m. 84; ex. 4b). The hysterical A-A<sup>b</sup> is doubled by second violins and reinforced by brass and timpani; a bizarre linear progression drags us back to C minor, where the long-delayed consequent of F-A-F finally closes off the first theme group—and the struggle—with a full cadence in the tonic.

Significantly, the transitional passage that follows is a brief respite (12 bars) from obsessive transformation of the desire motto; unlike any of the previous cadences to C, the phobic one at m. 84

appears to have worked—to have driven the conflict far enough underground so that a functional modulation can take shape, and to have cleared a space where the second theme area can play with distant transformations of desire without threatening the prevailing tonality.

## 2. Movement I: Retransition (mm. 261-343)

Quite aside from the traditional exigencies of form, the moment of recapitulation is crucial to our repression-driven hermeneutic, for it involves re-engaging—and re-enacting—the primal moment of repression which opened the exposition.

The climax of the development section comes even as Brahms attempts to truncate it and re-establish the home dominant. At mm. 261-72 he tries one of the arbitrary repressive gestures that served this function in the exposition. Brass and timpani hammer out half-cadences in C, resolutely ignoring the fact that the anguished chromaticism of the strings is saturated with the desire motto. A<sup>b</sup>-A in the “phobic” violin register (mm. 265-66) should be a clear warning that all is not well, but the string outbursts all do come around—however unwillingly—to G, and the passage *does* finally settle down onto a sustained dominant pedal (mm. 273-92).

But, when the dominant pedal begins to pulse in steady triplet eighths, the woodwinds to descend in chromatic thirds, and the strings to climb chromatically against them, Brahms is in serious psychic trouble. This passage is an overt reminiscence of the slow introduction—the only one thus far in the Allegro. The introduction, the music that comes *before* the first act of repression, stands here for the instinct-desire that the Allegro repressed into unconsciousness—and an untransformed return of this material is too threatening not to provoke a violent reaction. The analogous situation in psychoanalytic treatment was familiar to Freud:

We...observe that the patient can go on spinning a whole chain of...associations, till he is brought up in the midst of them against some thought-formation, the relation of which to what is repressed acts so intensely that he is compelled to repeat his attempt at repression.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Freud, “Repression,” 107.

All through the exposition and development, Brahms has been spinning a "chain of transformations and associations" based largely on the chromatic motto I have identified with desire; now, having reinvoked what the Allegro has consistently denied—the unmediated passion of the introduction—he must attempt one last climactic act of repression.

The desire motive floats dreamily down in sequence, gradually darkening, until by m. 291 the texture is submerged in gloom. We descend into the abyss—the unconscious, where repressed desire, in Freud's evocative phrase:

ramifies like a fungus, so to speak, in the dark and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when translated and revealed to the neurotic are bound not merely to seem alien to him, but to terrify him by the way in which they reflect an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct.<sup>15</sup>

The striking retransition at mm. 293*ff.* seems to be a depiction of this process. The chromatic motto that had seemed so ethereal in the violins now becomes brutish, almost obscene, when taken over by the contrabassoon and double basses. Desire rises out of the depths of the orchestra in a tense, grinding canonic crescendo of animal force; the first violins are pushed, semitone by semitone, once more into their screaming "phobic" register.

By the time they reach the crucial A<sup>b</sup>, it is an almost unbearably dissonant ninth, for Brahms has launched his last epic gesture of repression. Brass and drums thunder out eighth-note triplets on G, blotting out and denying the seductive reminiscence of thirty-seven bars earlier. The C-C<sup>#</sup>-D of desire which opened the Allegro recurs full force in the horns and woodwind—but this freshly planted dominant holds on and manages to contain it. By mm. 333-34, the chromatic rise has been halted on F and rhythmic instability banished. Control has the upper hand—a brassy and virile triumph over desire that will be sealed as soon as the crashing V7 chords resolve to I.

Of course, we are being set up, for what Brahms dramatizes in this return to the tonic (mm. 335-43) is not the assertion of control over desire, but the impossibility of control (ex. 5). At m. 335 the

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15. *Ibid.*

mm. 335-41

V7?

V7?

V7?

V7?

V7?

V7?

Example 5

hard-won dominant evaporates: its G-F seventh does not obey the rules of functional tonality by resolving to C-E. Instead, it succumbs to the contrary chromatic logic of the desire motto, becomes an augmented sixth, and “resolves” to a unison octave F<sup>#</sup>. The desire motto leaps free, and expands this disorienting enharmonic slip into a wild chromatic digression. Three times the motto ascends, three times the bass lurches into a semitone slide underneath, and three times it stops short on what might be a dominant—but isn’t. Each time functionality is overpowered by chromatic contrary motion, and what we now understand as an augmented sixth chord resolves to a new linear six-four.

Consider example 5, which juxtaposes this movement once again with the opening of *Tristan und Isolde*. It seems almost clinically perverse that here, at the spot in the form—and in the sexual drama—where we absolutely must have tonal closure, Brahms finally allows his chromatic desire theme the lascivious tonal freedom from which Wagner began. Remember that the first bars of *Tristan* also harmonize a rising chromatic line with a threefold sequence, stop on three “dominants,” and refuse to resolve any of them. (One can perform an impromptu Hans Keller-inspired “functional analysis” simply by playing through example 5 following my dotted lines rather than the staff lines; the cross-cutting willfully violates propriety, but may surprise the ear into an intuitive penetration of Brahms’s defenses.) Brahms’s desire theme may have looked like a theme from *Tristan* in the exposition; now it begins, amazingly enough, to act like one.

But ultimately the *Tristan* connection is not the point; it merely allows us to take another glance through the hermeneutic window at this crucial structural juncture. Remember that this desire theme, which twists and writhes so desperately and disorientingly away from the tonic, is the *first* theme, the *masculine* theme. Like Beethoven in the Ninth, Brahms has created a first theme that resists its own recapitulation—that denies by its very existence the structural logic that forces it back to the tonic. The “sonata imperative” to return to the tonic is, here and elsewhere, correctly identified with sex-

ual repression.<sup>16</sup> But the sonata's "masculine" themes, although they must obey that imperative, do not always go without resistance.

To finish off my readings, I would like to consider briefly two moments later in the symphony.

### 3. Movement 4: Coda (mm. 391-457)

The first occurs in the closing bars of the final movement. Neither the desire motto nor the F-A-F theme appear in the fourth movement at all. Shedding the grim concentration and abstraction of the first movement, Brahms now hides himself behind a plethora of themes and a cascade of conventional extramusical allusions. The finale invokes in turn all the standard Romantic symbols of physical transcendence: Nature, in the horn calls; Religion, in the trombone chorale; and Art—as epitomized by the finales of Mozart's "Jupiter" and Beethoven's Ninth—in the openly derivative themes of the main Allegro. Brahms is—to echo modern twelve-step therapeutics—"in deep denial."

So how to interpret the strange interruption of mm. 431-47? In the midst of a final jubilant rush to the cadence, the entire orchestra breaks off to thunder out A-A<sup>b</sup>-F<sup>#</sup>-G in unison over a tonic pedal (ex. 4c). The figure bears no relation to anything around it—it is a sudden paroxysm which seems unmotivated, almost irrational.

And well it might—for it plunges us back into the angst-ridden first movement, not with the unifying logic of an abstract motivic connection, but with the arbitrary and uncanny specificity of a flashback. The passage embodies a failure of transcendence, but a successful repression, since all Brahms can seem to remember of the first movement is struggle and fear, as embodied in the terrifying phobic scream of mm. 48-51. He relives it here, surrounded by bright C major.

There is no resolution; Brahms denies the repressive struggle itself with one last cadential repression. The syncopated passage at

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16. On Beethoven's Ninth, see Susan McClary, "Getting Down Off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," in *Feminine Endings*, 128.

mm. 439-43 caricatures the phobic motto, straightening out its chromaticism into blandly diatonic falling thirds. And all sex, desire, anxiety—everything—is banished from thought by the most perfectly perfect cadence Brahms could write, four detached (in both the musical and psychological sense) chords which he hammers home deliberately, complete with a quasi-ecclesiastical 4-3 suspension.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Movement 2: Coda (mm. 99-128)

And now, finally, Woman enters the discussion; in this symphony she is *Mutter*, and she resides in the slow movement.

We are justified in reading the second movement as feminine on basic structural principles, but there is a more specific signbearer of femininity in this movement—the solo violin which makes its ap-

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17. The sense that there is something wrong underneath the strenuous affirmation of the finale has been noted by more than one commentator. Hans Gal's opinion was that "the hymnlike enthusiasm of his finale lacks the ultimate in genuine, convinced, and convincing joy. The jubilation with which the movement comes to a close is the result of a self-delusion. One can sense in it more the desire to be joyful than real surrender to joy" (*Johannes Brahms: His Work and Personality*, trans. Joseph Stein [New York, 1963], 141). Is surrender to joy too close to surrender to passion? Gal then goes on to quote a devastating letter on the subject from Clara Schumann to Brahms: "By the same token, the exultation in the coda somehow seems contrived, not fully convincing. Clara, with her extraordinary sensitivity, made an innocent remark which certainly hits the nail on the head:

If I may still say something about the last movement, or rather the very end of the movement (the presto), I do feel that musically the presto, compared to the supreme exaltation that precedes it, falls a bit flat. To me its intensification seems to lie in external rather than internal emotion; it somehow does not organically evolve from the whole, but seems merely to have been added as a brilliant afterthought. Forgive me, my dear Johannes, but I can't help being perfectly frank with you. (pp. 141-42)

In this context, Clara's is hardly an "innocent" remark, and rather unfair, since anxiety arising from repressed Oedipal passion for her is what the "brilliant afterthought" of the coda is trying to cover over with "external emotion."

Brahms, Symphony No. 1, mvt. 2, final cadence

Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, final cadence

### Example 6

pearance at m. 90. Aside from an orchestral convention equating lyric violin solos with the female (consider the character solos in pieces like *Scheherezade* and *Ein Heldenleben*), the way Brahms deploys his solo violin invokes standard tropes that we have learned to read as feminine: it is *decorative*, sweetly providing an octave-higher icing to melodies carried by other instruments; in its one independent solo it is *ornamental*, transforming the horn theme underneath it into to graceful arabesques; and it is terribly *sentimental*. It is no wonder that most orchestral concertmasters make sure to play this passage with plenty of vibrato.

Yet what seems sentimental or precious to the adult is perfectly natural to the child; Hermann Kretschmar characterized the tone of this movement as one of “child-like trust.”<sup>18</sup> He associates this tone primarily with the second theme of the A section (mm. 17-25). The solo violin’s first entrance can thus be read as maternal: it lovingly doubles this theme when it returns at m. 90. This “*Kinderszene*” becomes more concrete when the theme repeats in the tonic: the timpani, flute, and inner strings set up a gentle triplet rocking figure that transforms the passage into a Brahmsian *Wiegenlied*.

We are now ready to understand the final reappearance of the desire motto, which has already made two gnomic appearances that the movement failed to acknowledge (mm. 6 and 71). It sneaks in for the last time at m. 116. Miraculously, the feminine solo violin responds: she actually plays along! The V/V–V–I cadential progression that sounded so arbitrarily brutal in the first movement now provides the gentle harmonization for an ecstatic lyric continuation.

The release is palpable, and is symbolized with brilliant economy in the transformation that consummates the movement’s final plagal cadence. The phrase at m. 122 begins as if it were the desire theme, but the three chromatic notes expand into three gloriously diatonic ones: 1-1#-2 becomes simply 1-2-3. Desire is achieved, and its motto never appears in the symphony again. Example 6 returns us to *Tristan* one final time. Wagner achieves his final transfiguration with the very same cadence: a chromatic desire motive expanding to diatonic 1-2-3 over the minor subdominant. Considering the resemblance, one might well call this Brahms’s *Liebestod*.

## VI.

My attempt at a work-based “psycho-hermeneutic” for Brahms’s First shows the potential richness and complexity of mapping (male) sexuality onto musical structure. But it does

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18. Hermann Kretschmar, *Führer durch den Concertsaal, I. Abteilung: Sinfonie und Suite* (Leipzig, 1887), trans. Susan Gillespie, in *Brahms and his World*, ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton, 1990), 126.

beg a crucial biographical question. Thus far I have been quite deliberately cheating in my presentation: using the conventions of analytic discourse to elide a fundamental epistemological distinction. When I used locutions of the form "Brahms does X," I relied on the fact that we normally understand such phrases to mean "X occurs, and it is discursively convenient to impute agency to an abstract composerly construct, which for obvious reasons we name after the composer of the notes that give rise to our perception of X." But much of the *frisson* of this kind of paper derives from the fact that when X stands for a psychoanalytic concept like sexual repression, strategic displacement of the actual historical composer can never be totally successful. It has been rhetorically convenient (and fruitfully irresponsible) to obscure the distinction, but the question remains to be confronted: I have psychoanalyzed the symphony; have I also automatically psychoanalyzed Johannes Brahms? Is its sexuality actually *his*? Or, put another way, why would a man like Brahms write a symphony so symbolically dominated by repressive struggles for control over transgressive desire?

An autobiographical program for the First Symphony has been a fixation of Brahms literature almost from the beginning: for many commentators, this is the "Clara" symphony, inspired by the intense Oedipal drama played out between Robert, Clara, and young Brahms in the two years (1854-56) of Robert Schumann's insanity and death. Thus Max Kalbeck, in his pioneering (and still unsurpassed) biography of 1912, asserts with no documentary evidence that the first movement of this symphony was originally sketched out in 1855—which would place its conception at the height of Brahms's infatuation with Clara Schumann. He thinks the symphony's first "seed" took root when Brahms saw Schumann's *Manfred*—a tragedy set in motion by incestuous love—and was forcibly impressed by the parallels with his situation. Kalbeck bases this conjecture *solely* on two pieces of "internal evidence": the use of the F-A-F *Urmotive*, and a motivic correspondence between Schumann's *Manfred* music and op. 68/I (the oboe tune in the second

a.



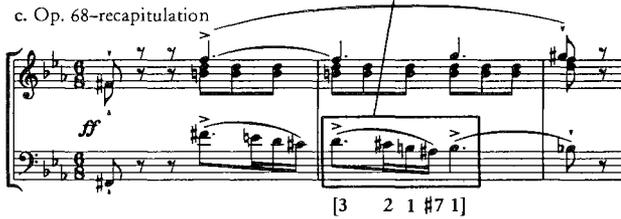
b. Op. 60



c. Op. 68—exposition



c. Op. 68—recapitulation



Example 7

theme group). He thus claims that this symphony is a depiction of the quasi-incestuous “relations between Johannes, Robert, and Clara.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Michael Musgrave (who follows the controversial crypto-hermeneutic approach of Eric Sams), the first theme of this symphony incorporates a turn figure that is a transposed version of a well-documented “Clara” theme used by Robert Schumann. Example 7 demonstrates the relation between this important motive and the C-(B)-A-(G<sup>#</sup>)-A that ap-

19. Kalbeck III, 93.

parently stood for Clara in the Schumann circle.<sup>20</sup> This famous motive provides the opening theme of the Piano Quartet, op. 60; the original C<sup>#</sup>-minor version of this work also dates from 1855-56, and was linked by Brahms himself in a letter to his publisher with that archetypical image of hopeless, tormented, and suicidal love, Young Werther. Heinz Becker in the New Grove solemnly informs us that op. 60 is "strongly autobiographical, describing the strivings of a lonely man in an insoluble dilemma."

We are drifting dangerously close to "tabloid" musicology. It is not my intention to resift the (copious) documentary evidence of the Brahms-Clara Schumann relationship in search of a sexual smoking gun, nor am I ultimately interested in the First Symphony as disguised love letter or orchestral *True Confessions*. Brahms's infatuation with Clara was a principle aetiological factor in his life-long neurosis—a neurosis (and this is the only hermeneutic reason to dig around in his psyche) that he shared in kind, if not in degree, with *all* nineteenth-century bourgeois "civilized" males.

Freud's article "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" discusses the aetiology and mechanisms of what he termed *psychical impotence*. Men diagnosed with this syndrome rigidly separated all sexual feeling from any emotional contact; they required the sexual object to be degraded before they could achieve potency, and often had sexual relations only with prostitutes or servants.

Freud traced the causes of this neurosis to a partial failure in childhood integration of the libido—an inability to merge the intense presexual affections for family members (the infamous "Oedipus complex") with the later growth of actual genital sexuality. He saw two precipitating factors: "this inhibition in development... [is]...an effect of *strong fixations in childhood*

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20. Michael Musgrave, "Brahms's First Symphony: Thematic Coherence and its Secret Origin," *Music Analysis* 2, no. 2 (1983): 117-134.

and of *frustration in reality later*, after the incest barrier has intervened."<sup>21</sup>

To anyone familiar with Brahms's biography this description will appear highly suggestive. Nietzsche once sardonically characterized Brahms's music as having the "melancholy of impotence"—an offhand observation, perhaps, which in this context seems a diagnosis of almost clinical precision. Brahms's childhood and early maturity provided a textbook succession of strong fixations and frustrated sexuality. His unusually intense attachment to his mother has been remarked upon by many biographers. On the other hand, Brahms's adolescent sexual awakening was a sordid disaster—his description of his treatment in the bordellos of the Hamburg docks verges on what today would be ruthlessly prosecuted as sexual child abuse.

It is not surprising, then, that Brahms's first strong extrafamilial romantic attachment was the Oedipal triangle with the Schumanns. When he first met the Schumanns he was barely twenty—still a child, as surviving pictures show. What more natural than that the Schumanns should become surrogate parents—the respectable, cultured, musically brilliant parents a poor youth like Brahms would dream about? And what more *unnatural* than that Robert should conveniently disappear into an asylum and that Brahms's distant adoration for Clara should turn into a dangerously real (and realizable) fixation?

It is unlikely that Brahms's physical desires, utterly frustrated for three years both by outer reality (Clara was married) and an inner incest taboo (Clara was his substitute "mother"), could spring free after Robert's death: here in force are the two "precipitating factors" of psychical impotence. One might well surmise that if the moment actually came Brahms would not—or could not—rise to the occasion.

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21. Sigmund Freud, "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" (1912), in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: 1963), 63; emphasis mine.

A clinical summation: Brahms's love affair with Clara could never be consummated because she was too much like his mother, and Robert was much too much like his father; this quasi-incestuous passion had to be ruthlessly repressed, a task which appears to have been accomplished by late 1857:

You must seriously try to alter, my dearest Clara. Every morning make the determined resolution to spend the day more equably and happily. Passions are not natural to mankind, they are always exceptions or excrescences. The man in whom they overstep the limits should regard himself as an invalid and seek a medicine for his life and for his health. The ideal and genuine man is calm both in his joy and his sorrow. Passions must quickly pass or else they must be hunted out.<sup>22</sup>

But the repressed must return; in later life Brahms's relationships with women (like Agathe von Siebold and Elisabeth von Herzogenberg) repeatedly played out the Clara scenario of infatuation and withdrawal before physical intimacy, while he grew up to be a man who was on a first-name basis with most

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22. From a letter of 11 October 1857. Clara's first preserved letter to Brahms, nine months later, is the dignified but wounded reaction of a woman in the unpleasant process of being emotionally (and perhaps physically) rejected:

I wish you would interpret my feelings a little more generously than you often do. Anybody reading what you have written me about my enthusiasm would think me an extremely hysterical person who worships her friend like a god. And, after all, what does it all amount to? All I did was to show Herr Bogler your choral prelude... Honestly I do not get excited about it. But that I am often mightily captivated by the wealth of your genius, that you always seem to be one on whom heaven has showered its fairest gifts and that I love you and honor you for so many magnificent qualities—all this is true, dearest Johannes, and has taken deep root in my heart. So do not try to kill it in me by your cold philosophizing—it is impossible.

I am very upset by what you write about Göttingen. That you so much dislike the idea of going there is hateful to me.... I should prefer the pain of being separated from you than to see you unhappy on my account in Göttingen because you were forced to be idle... I am waiting for another letter, my Johannes. If only I could find longing as sweet as you do. It only gives me pain and fills my heart with unspeakable woe. Farewell! Think kindly of your Clara. (1 July 1858; see Litzmann, 86-88)

of the prostitutes in Vienna. Ultimately this kind of repetition-compulsion may well be the origin of Brahms's obsession with structures of tonal transgression and control in music, with chromaticism, with mottos that are repressed only to return, transformed, over and over again.

And Freud, in his most radical (if inadvertent) cultural critique, points out that as it was with Brahms, so it was with the entire civilized world: "the behavior in love of the men of present-day civilization bears in general the character of the psychically impotent type."<sup>23</sup> In other words: not every man had a Clara—but every man has a mother, and thus, a problem with women. The case of Brahms reminds us that in the nineteenth-century sexuality was the Achilles' heel of the patriarchal male—a constant locus of self-betrayal for the masculine ego. The struggle for sexual control was fiercely fought between men and women, but that was a displacement; the battle was always already lost within the depths of the male psyche. Works of art have been called to witness the external battle; they can also portray the internal contradictions of a sexuality turned neurotically against itself.

## VII.

To conclude, I will simply point out that this study is meant not to refute the current sexual politics of the sonata, but to refine them. In inspiration, in methodology, and in style this paper would not be thinkable without the assumption that sexual politics do exist in classical music—and not just in the flamboyant emotionalism of a (marginalized) Tchaikovsky, but even in dour, abstract, canonic *Brahms*.

But (to reverse a famous feminist slogan) the political has sometimes been a bit impersonal. Once having identified the first theme with the nineteenth-century patriarchal male, we

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23. Freud, "The Most Prevalent Form," 64.

are sometimes guilty of considering him—and placing him in our narrative constructions—as he would like to have appeared (stable, in total control, unconflicted, rational) rather than as he clearly was: fearful, conflicted, often neurotic, and in a very equivocal relation with both his own desire and the mores and power structures of society. For a male critic to acknowledge this fact, and implicate Brahms in our common predicament, is hardly an act of disrespect.<sup>24</sup>

A final return to the outsider's perspective with which I began: it is probably not coincidental that while the academic hero of *Possession* is struggling through a particularly swampy piece of feminist criticism, the academic heroine (in the next room) is making her dissatisfied way through an arid and inept piece of "stringent modern psychoanalytic criticism." The hapless object of study, a male Victorian poet, evidently suffered—surprise!—from a "mid-life crisis." Her reaction:

Maud decided she intuited something terrible about Cropper's imagination from all this. He had a peculiarly vicious version of reverse hagiography: the desire to cut his subject down to size.<sup>25</sup>

Only the most defensive patriarch would equate admitting Brahms's sexual fallibility with "cutting him down to size"; if—and I speak directly to my compeers now—straight, male writing on music is ever to approach the sex and gender honesty demanded by the feminist and gay/lesbian critiques, we all must begin by admitting, *à la* Gustave Flaubert:

"Johannes Brahms, *c'est moi!*"

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24. But it may upset the conventional appreciation of this "masterwork." In a recent *New York Times* article on attempts by marketing executives to give classical music "sex appeal," gentle fun was poked at a steamy Pittsburgh Symphony brochure ("Become Intimate With Brahms, Ravel And Tschai-kovsky...") by pointing out that the subscription series being sold included Brahms's First Symphony, a piece the *Times* claims is "not noted for [its] erotic content" (*New York Times*, 2 May 1993). Perhaps Madison Avenue is on to something...

25. Byatt, *Possession*, 272.