



## Commentary on Samuel Ng's review of Peter H. Smith's *Expressive Forms in Brahms's Instrumental Music: Structure and Meaning in His Werther Quartet*

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[1] I would like to address an analytic idea proposed by Samuel Ng in his review of Peter Smith's monograph on Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor. In his discussion of the opening of the first movement, Ng takes issue with Smith's reading of the G-major chord in bar 21 as the dominant. Instead, he says that the appearance of this chord comes as an unexpected surprise. Not only does he call it "the first striking harmonic event of the piece," but he also later describes it as "a truly expressive gesture that eludes virtually any structural explanation." Furthermore, he suggests that the G $\flat$  chord appearing two bars later (bar 23) is the more natural continuation. Ng attempts to find an integral relationship between form and content, and to "reveal structural intricacies that may well embody expressive connotations." His analytic reading of the opening theme is, however, surely incorrect. Not only is the G-major chord in bar 21 the long-expected dominant, but it is the G $\flat$  chord that offers the unexpected surprise. I wish to address this issue not just in order to present yet another alternative reading, but because the correct interpretation of the opening of this Brahms Piano Quartet evokes an important Classical tonal procedure that both Smith and Ng overlook in their analyses.

[2] One of the striking features at the beginning of the Brahms Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor is the quadrupled B $\flat$  that appears in bar 11, after the half cadence on the dominant. It transposes the four-octave C at the start of the piece down a whole step, and ushers in the return of the opening theme in the key of B-flat minor. Before examining the tonal structure of the antecedent part of the Quartet (bars 1–31), I would like to discuss the convention of this opening gesture.

[3] The opening theme of the Brahms is modeled after the Classical construction of two parallel phrases in which the second repeats the opening at a different pitch level. The most usual procedure is to repeat the second phrase a whole step above the initial statement. In Mozart's Piano Sonata in D, K. 576, for example, the rising arpeggio of the opening theme announced in D major is answered by another statement of the arpeggiated theme in E minor (**Example 1**). In order to avoid parallel fifths and octaves in the voice-leading from I to II, a dominant chord appearing at the end of the opening phrase serves as a voice-leading corrective. The beginning of Brahms's Symphony No. 2, op. 73, has a similar construction, but here a B-minor chord, resulting from a 5–6 contrapuntal motion, breaks up the potential parallels between the two statements of the opening theme in D major and E minor (**Example 2**).

[4] While the parallel construction of two phrases on adjacent ascending steps appears rather frequently in the major mode, the reverse situation, of answering a phrase down by step, occurs much less often. In fact, in major, an answering phrase on VII is not possible if it remains in its normal form as a diminished triad. In order to enable such a repetition,  $\text{vii}^{\circ}$  must be chromatically altered to  $\text{b}\text{vii}^{\circ}$ , transforming VII into a major triad.<sup>(1)</sup> The beginning of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata presents such a procedure; following the opening theme's initial statement in the tonic C major, it appears four bars later in B-flat major. **Example 3** shows how a contrapuntal 5–6 motion breaks up the potential parallels in the stepwise motion from I to  $\text{b}\text{VII}$ . At the foreground level, the intervening  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chord in this contrapuntal progression is tonicized by an applied  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chord.

[5] The initial statement of the opening theme at the beginning of the "Waldstein" would appear to lead to its repeated statement in B-flat. However, the first four bars are repeated over bars 5–8, and a descending chromatic bass results. In the larger tonal organization, it is actually the  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chord in bar 7 that carries forth the progression from the opening tonic. Essentially, the initial and final chords in the pair of 5–6 contrapuntal patterns articulate the motion from I to  $\text{IV}^6$ .<sup>(2)</sup> As shown in **Example 4**, this progression from I to  $\text{IV}^6$  ultimately leads to  $\text{V}^7$  in bar 9. Scale degree 4 in the top voice of  $\text{IV}^6$  prepares the dissonant seventh above  $\text{V}^7$ . Furthermore, Beethoven emphasizes the motion to the dominant by transforming  $\text{IV}^6$  to its minor form, creating a half-step motion from  $\text{Ab}$  to G in the bass.

[6] A variant of the progression found in the antecedent part of the "Waldstein" occurs at the beginning of Beethoven's earlier Piano Sonata in G, op. 31 no. 1. **Example 5** presents the tonal structure of the opening theme. In the descending 5–6 motion, root-position triads replace the  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chords, and each of these root-position substitutions is itself tonicized by the subsidiary progression II–V. In the overall tonal structure, however, the initial tonic of this movement ultimately leads to the IV chord that ends the sequential pattern in bar 22. This IV is expanded to II in the following bar, before continuing to V.

[7] In the two Beethoven sonata examples, the chromatic inflections of  $\text{vii}^{\circ}$  to  $\text{b}\text{vii}^{\circ}$ , which result in statements of the opening theme on  $\text{b}\text{VII}$ , invoke modal mixture. In pieces in the minor mode, this chromatic alteration is not necessary because the natural form of VII is already a stable major chord. Because of this, parallel phrase constructions in which the second phrase repeats the first a step lower are found more frequently in minor-mode pieces than in major. However, when this pattern appears in minor,  $\text{b}\text{VII}$  is usually altered to  $\text{b}\text{VII}^{\flat}$  in order to preserve a literal repetition of the opening idea. Despite differences in style and genre, Mozart's Piano Fantasy in C minor, K. 475, the slow movement of Brahms's String Sextet No. 2 in G, op. 36, and the 25<sup>th</sup> Variation of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations all begin exactly in this way.

[8] A striking example of this procedure occurs at the beginning of the Introduction to Mozart's "Dissonance" Quartet, K. 465. Despite the bold voice-leading at the foreground, the tonal pattern of the first eight bars is virtually the same as the "Waldstein," but in minor. There is a chromatically descending bass motion over the first eight bars, and bars 5–8 are an exact transposition down a whole step of bars 1–4. However, unlike the "Waldstein," where the repeated C-major chords at the beginning leave no doubt as to the key of the piece, the "Dissonance" Quartet presents the opening tonic far more ambiguously. In the opening bar, a sustained  $\text{Ab}3$  enters mysteriously in the viola over the repeated C3 eighth notes of the cello. Despite this sparse appearance of two notes, the  $\text{Ab}$  comes from an implied G, expressing an ascending 5–6 contrapuntal motion that confirms the key of C as minor rather than major.

[9] In bar 2, as  $\text{Ab}3$  in the viola descends to G3, the first violin enters with a sustained  $\text{Ab}5$ , resulting in perhaps the most renowned cross-relation in tonal music.<sup>(3)</sup> From a compositional standpoint, the successive juxtaposition of  $\text{Ab}$  and  $\text{Ab}5$  results from maintaining the entries of the canon in the upper three voices consistently at the temporal span of one beat (**Example 6**). However, it is the tonicization of the dominant in bar 3 that necessitates the appearance of  $\text{Ab}5$ . **Example 7** presents a voice-leading analysis of the opening eight bars of the "Dissonance" Quartet, showing the difference in meaning between the  $\text{Ab}$  and  $\text{Ab}5$ . The  $\text{Ab}$  defines the mode of the Introduction by articulating  $\text{b}\text{v}^{\circ}$ , whereas the  $\text{Ab}5$  belongs to the harmonies of the subsidiary progression  $\text{II}^{\flat} - \text{V}^{\flat}$  that leads to the dominant  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chord in bar 3.<sup>(4)</sup>

[10] Following the appearance of the dominant in  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  position in bars 3–4, the opening four bars are transposed down a whole step, resulting in a restatement of the opening phrase in B-flat minor. The G-major  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chord preceding it thus serves to break up the potential parallel fifths between the successive whole-step statements of the opening phrase. Looking at the first eight bars in the larger context of the Introduction, it is the  $\text{v}^{\circ}$  chord at the end of the sequential passage (bars 7–8) that represents the important structural goal. As with the "Waldstein," it represents  $\text{IV}^6$ , but its function here is to serve as the midpoint of an arpeggiation down from I to  $\text{I}^6$  (**Example 8**).

[11] The opening of the Brahms Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor follows the Classical model of a minor-mode pairing of phrases in which the initial musical idea presented in the tonic is repeated a step lower and altered to its parallel minor (i.e.  $\flat VII\flat$ ). In both Smith's and Ng's voice-leading graphs of the opening ten bars, they show a motion from the tonic to the dominant. I regard this root-position dominant chord at bar 9, however, as deriving from a descending 5–6 contrapuntal motion rather than a true harmonic progression. Where my reading differs significantly from theirs is in viewing the B-flat minor statement of the opening theme as part of another descending 5–6 sequence.

[12] By failing to understand the sequential nature of the consecutive phrases descending by step, Smith and Ng end up regarding B-flat minor as a distinct key area.<sup>(5)</sup> Although Smith reads the arrival of the dominant at bar 21, he doesn't explain how the B-flat minor statement of the opening theme gets there. Ng, meanwhile, is led astray by trying to account for this G-major dominant in the context of B-flat minor. According to him, the parallel  $\mathfrak{F}$  chords over bars 17–20 are "firmly grounded in B-flat minor." Because of this, Ng concludes that "the G-major harmony [in bar 21] hardly sounds like the dominant of the principal key." His erroneous pronouncement that the motion to G-major "defies normative harmonic logic," leads him to view the  $G\flat$  chord in bar 23 as "the legitimate resolution of the  $V^7$  to VI" in B-flat minor.

[13] As **Example 9** shows, the G-major chord in bar 21 does represent the arrival on the structural dominant. The brackets above the graph show the parallelism of the two phrases that are a step apart. The statement of the opening theme in B-flat minor appears as part of a sequential pattern that ultimately leads from I to IV.<sup>(6)</sup> At the arrival on the subdominant in bar 20,  $IV^6$  with the raised form of  $\mathfrak{B}$  (i.e.  $A\sharp$ ) unfolds into a  $IV^7$ , before making the expected half cadence on the dominant in bar 21.

[14] Immediately after the long-awaited arrival on V, the  $\mathfrak{F}$  chord over  $G\flat$  in bar 22 comes as an unexpected surprise. This initiates the highly unusual passage of alternating  $\mathfrak{F}$  and  $\mathfrak{B}$  chords.<sup>(7)</sup> Not only does this create a feeling of tonal instability, but it also expresses an atmosphere of uncertainty. Despite the emotional poignancy of these bars, however, this passage serves to prolong the dominant over bars 21–27 by a neighboring diminished-third chord in bar 26 (**Example 10**). As shown in the successive stages, the F-major chord in bar 25 prepares the chromatic inflection of  $F-F\sharp$  in the bass, coinciding with  $A-A\flat$  in the middle voice.

[15] Although the dominant is finally established in bar 27, Brahms attempts once more to deflect our expectations through the introduction of what Smith dubs as an "unheimlich"  $E\flat$  at the end of bar 28. The pizzicato Es above the third  $G-B\sharp$  in bars 28–30, create the illusion of an E-minor harmony, but, as Smith correctly notes, it occurs as the midpoint of a  $5-\flat 6-7$  motion above the dominant.<sup>(8)</sup> With the arrival of  $V^9$  at bar 31, the antecedent part of the exposition ends, leading to a forceful restatement of the opening theme in staccato chords, emphasized by the dynamic marking of forte.

[16] In closing, I would like to mention the opening of Brahms's String Quartet No. 1 in C minor in relation to the tonal procedure explored in this commentary.<sup>(9)</sup> The opening 22 bars of this Quartet represent an extended antecedent that leads to the dominant in bar 19.<sup>(10)</sup> **Example 11** shows the expansion of an ascending 5–6 contrapuntal motion above the tonic C over the first seven bars. At the arrival in bar 7 of the climactic  $\mathfrak{F}$  chord with  $A\flat 5$  in the top voice, Brahms initiates a two-bar sequence of parallel  $\mathfrak{F}$  chords. As shown in **Example 12**, this pattern leads into an expansion of  $IV^6$  leading to V in bar 19.

[17] **Example 13** shows how the motion in parallel  $\mathfrak{F}$  chords over bars 7–10 originates from a descending 5–6 motion with chromatic inflections in the bass. This graph also presents an overview of the entire antecedent part of the Quartet. In bar 18 the  $IV^6$  becomes unfolded into a  $\sharp IV^7$  before arriving on the dominant. Unlike the other examples we have examined, this remarkable opening theme does not repeat the initial phrase a step lower on  $\flat VII\flat$ . However, the repeated gesture in bars 7–8 and bars 9–10 clearly evoke the descending 5–6 contrapuntal succession leading from I to  $IV^6$ . It is as if a repeated statement of bars 1–6 in B-flat minor had been elided between bars 8 and 9. Despite the novel manner in which Brahms presents this opening theme, its tonal structure is deeply steeped in the Classical tradition. In the words of Wagner, we see "what can still be done with the old forms by somebody who knows how to handle them."<sup>(11)</sup>

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## Footnotes

1. In the minor mode, this parallel construction of having the same theme presented a whole-step apart is not possible due to the fact that II is a diminished triad. However, if  $\mathbf{2}$  is lowered to  $\mathbf{b2}$ , resulting in  $\mathbf{bII}$ , this parallelism can also occur. The opening of Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata with its successive statement of the ominous opening theme in F minor and G-flat major is only possible through this chromatic alteration.

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2. At the start of the consequent part of the exposition in the "Waldstein," following the statement of the opening theme in the tonic over bars 14–17, the theme is repeated a step higher, resulting in its appearance in D-minor in bar 18. A different tonal connection now occurs between the initial and final chords in the successive 5–6 patterns. The A-minor  $\mathbf{5}$  chord in bar 20 connects back to the tonic, initiating a 5–6 contrapuntal progression above C. This motion from G to A continues further to  $\mathbf{A\sharp}$  in bar 22, transforming the tonic into an augmented-sixth chord that leads to V of the mediant, the key of the "second" theme.

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3. Even today, scholars describe the opening of this Quartet as nothing short of bewildering. Maynard Solomon, in *Mozart: A Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), calls the first few bars "an unprecedented network of disorientations, dissonances, rhythmic obscurities, and atmospheric dislocations . . . Reality has been defamiliarized, the uncanny has supplanted the commonplace." And in *The Cambridge Mozart Encyclopedia*, ed. Cliff Eisen and Simon Keefe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), John Irving, the author of the chapter on string quartets, points out the "whole-tone clusters at the beginning of bars 3 and 7," and describes the opening nine bars as a series of chords "which confuse, rather than clarify, our tonal perspective." An excellent historical overview of the many theoretical responses to the "Dissonance" Quartet appears in Julie Anne Vertrees, "Mozart's String Quartet K. 465: The History of a Controversy," *Current Musicology* 17 (1974). Although different in its details, the large-scale motion of bars 1–12 in my analysis is essentially the same as represented in Heinrich Schenker's Example 99/3 in *Free Composition*, trans. and ed. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979), and the one by Oswald Jonas in the Appendix to the English translation of Schenker's *Harmony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

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4. A similar juxtaposition between  $\mathbf{Ab}$  and  $\mathbf{A\flat}$  in C minor occurs in bars 12 and 14 of the principal theme in Chopin's Etude in C minor, op. 10 no. 12, known as the "Revolutionary" Etude. The two notes function the same way as in the Introduction to the "Dissonance" Quartet. Rather than evoking a mysterious atmosphere, however, this conflict takes the form of a struggle between  $\mathbf{b6}$  and  $\mathbf{b\flat6}$ , in keeping with the work's stormy character.

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5. Although this is not shown in his analytical graph, Smith designates bars 11–20 as "Phrase 2,  $\mathbf{bvii}$ " in the chart that makes up his Example 3.1.

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6. Curiously, Ng actually notates this harmonic progression through his use of the Roman numerals "i and iv" at the bottom of his graph. In his discussion, however, he insists on reading the F-major chord in bar 20 as the dominant of B-flat minor. Furthermore, he makes the erroneous connection of the IV harmony in bar 20 to the F-major chord in bar 25.

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7. These do not make up a 5–6 contrapuntal pattern, as Smith and Ng designate, but a succession of alternating  $\mathbf{3}$  and  $\mathbf{4}$  chords, an altogether much more unusual progression.

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8. Smith discusses this passage in fuller detail in "You Reap What You Sow: Some Instances of Rhythmic and Harmonic Ambiguity in Brahms," *Music Theory Spectrum* 28/1 (2006). As first noted by Donald Francis Tovey in *Essays in Musical Analysis*, supplementary volume: Chamber Music (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), this  $\mathbf{E\flat}$  comes into its own in the recapitulation, where it becomes realized as an E-minor harmony. This realization of  $\mathbf{bVI}$  in the key of G provides the impetus for the remarkable expansion of the major form of the dominant.

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9. Readers may wish to compare my (very different) analytical graph of the opening of the exposition with those of David Lewin in "Brahms, His Past, and Modes of Theory," *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George Bozarth

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Robert Morgan in “The Concept of Unity and Musical Analysis,” *Music Analysis* 22/1–2 (2003). The later article was a response to Kevin Korsyn’s essay “Brahms Research and Aesthetic Ideology,” *Music Analysis* 12/1 (1993), to which Korsyn in turn responded in “The Death of Musical Analysis? The Concept of Unity Revisited,” *Music Analysis* 23/2–3 (2004).

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10. Smith designates an ABA' formal design at the opening of the Quartet, instead of the familiar antecedent beginning of an exposition. According to him, the A' part returns at bar 23 with the appearance of the opening theme in the viola and cello. Allen Forte also presents this formal scheme in his article “Motivic Design and Structural Levels in the First Movement of Brahms’s String Quartet in C minor,” *Musical Quarterly* 69 (1983).

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11. Wagner made this remark upon hearing Brahms play the Variations on a Theme by Handel, op. 24, on February 6, 1864. Although somewhat patronizing, Wagner grudgingly acknowledged Brahms’s mastery in the Classical variation form. This was, incidentally, the only occasion the two composers met in person.

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