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Brahms's Non-Strophic Settings of Stanzaic Poetry

ABSTRACT

Background

Brahms advised Gustav Jenner to compose a strophic song whenever the text permits. And Brahms himself set over 150 stanzaic poems for solo voice and piano in which units of thematic structure (and often tonal syntactic structure) are congruent with individual stanzas. But he also composed twelve settings of stanzaic poems in which the musical architecture is not fully congruent with the stanzaic structure, what I will refer to as non-strophic settings. Although there are a handful of perceptive formal analyses of some individual songs in this group, especially Horne's analysis of the four Heine settings and Malin's analysis of 'Alte Liebe', there has been no general study of Brahms's song forms which has considered these non-strophic songs as a group; a few of the songs are mentioned in passing by Gerber in his landmark study, while other authors usually assign them to the formally nondescript category of 'through-composed'.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper identifies features of the poetry that explain non-strophic designs in Brahms's solo songs. Various types of formal noncongruence are defined, and the general discussion is supported by close readings of 'Nachklang' (Op. 59/4), 'Verrat' (Op. 105/5), and 'Eine gute, gute Nacht' (Op. 59/6).

Methods

Song is poetry refracted through the prism of music. Music, the medium of transmission, shapes the perception of poetry, exposing some components and obscuring others, for the poetic text is a complex utterance which, in addition to its poetic form, manifests rhythms in a broad spectrum of structural domains, domains such as syntax, semantics, and narrative (see Georgiades 1967 and Hallmark 2010). 'What the composer does, then, when he sets a poem to music,' writes Edward T. Cone (1989, 119), 'is to choose one among all its forms—or, more accurately, ... [to delimit] one subset [of] possible forms.' While formal design is thus always at issue, the issue becomes acutely clear when a composer chooses a form that runs contrary to a poem's stanzaic design.

There are two basic types of noncongruence: in one type, a formal articulation in the music subdivides a stanza, and in the other type, the continuation of a formal unit in the music suppresses a stanza break. These types may be combined, and there may also be more than one point of noncongruence in a song. In this paper I examine three non-strophic settings: one of each basic type and one special case.

(1) A subdivided stanza: 'Nachklang' (Op. 59/4). In May of 1856, Klaus Groth inscribed the poem in Brahms's copy of *Hochdeutsche Gedichte*. The stanzaic structure of the poem is

supported by features such as the rhyme scheme and the grammatical contrast between present progressive verbs in the first stanza and future conditional constructions in the second, which correspond to different time frames: during and then after the rain. Stanzas and couplets are further articulated by semantic parallelism: natural images of rain and sunshine alternating with human images of tears.

A strophic setting of some type is clearly warranted. And that is precisely the choice Brahms made when he first set the poem in 1872 under the title 'Regenlied' (WoO 23). But then some months later, in early 1873, he composed a second setting of the poem under a new title, 'Nachklang', and set three other poems by Groth. Brahms's second version is not strophic. He lengthens the second stanza by repeating the final line, creating a ninth unit of text. Melodic phrasing divides the text irregularly into seven segments, separated by rests. The tonal syntax also groups the segments into three larger sections, separated by interludes.

The outer sections are quotations from 'Regenlied', while the middle section is more like a paraphrase. The middle section also has a markedly different accompaniment pattern and takes place in a contrasting tonality. Thus the overall form has the effect of a rounded design in which the initiation of the reprise interrupts the second stanza. While the initial contrast is clearly warranted by the shift of time frame, the return to gloomier, 'rainy' music in the middle of the second stanza contradicts the continuation of the sunlit scene and focuses attention on the difference between what lingers on in nature and in the persona after the rain: the rain dries, but the persona's weeping intensifies.

(2) A suppressed stanza break: 'Verrat' (Op. 105/5). Karl Lemcke's narrative poem is a tragic story of betrayal. A woman takes a lover while her man is away. Returning earlier than expected, the man overhears his wife arranging another assignation with the lover. The man swears and then takes his vengeance.

Although 'Verrat' has six stanzas, Brahms composes only five thematic units, suppressing the division between stanzas 2 and 3. It is easy to see why Brahms might want to do so, for the woman's quoted speech begins at the end of stanza 2 and continues into the third stanza. Yet Brahms does not correlate the beginning of her speech with the initiation of a formal unit and instead embeds her utterance in an expanded variant of the first thematic unit.

Brahms's formal design is tied to the poem's narrative structure. The first stanza presents a state of equilibrium: the persona standing outside the house. The stable narrative state is fittingly represented by a fully closed thematic unit. The second stanza continues to describe the placid scene, hence it makes sense that the first couplet of stanza 2 musically parallels the opening of stanza 1. The first musical departure from parallelism corresponds precisely to the persona's mention of the disturbing sight of seeing the lover exiting their home, before

he hears the woman speak. The parallelism in the vocal line breaks down when the woman begins to speak but is then resumed for what is now an open-ended cadence (appropriate for the narrative moment, since the consequences of the events related are as yet unknown). The next stages of the narrative (stanzas 4 and 5) involve purposive action on the part of the persona. Brahms sets the stanzas to a pair of thematic units on a livelier theme in the contrasting key of E-flat minor. At the end of stanza 5, the persona utters the verb 'segnen', which signifies the act by means of which he achieves his desired end. And is at precisely here that the song modulates back to the tonic key. The final stanza describes the aftermath, which is a new state of equilibrium arising from the persona's actions. The final thematic unit, like the first, is appropriately a tonally self-sufficient structure.

(3) A special case of noncongruence: 'Eine gute, gute Nacht' (Op. 59/6). The speaker in the poem is a frustrated man who wants to sleep with a woman. But the woman, despite routinely bidding him good night, never gives him the good night he wants. Brahms composes an exceptionally witty setting, almost a musical farce, in which frequent repetitions and echoes of short musical phrases duplicate the mocking repetition within the woman's empty phrase, 'Eine gute, gute Nacht'. The accompaniment has a binary form: two 18-bar sections, each irregularly subdivided into three thematic units. Each part contains a stanza of poetry, but the phrasing of the vocal line is only sporadically in agreement with the accompaniment's thematic design. Moreover, the relationship between voice and accompaniment changes considerably in the second half of the song, such that very little of the melodic material from the first half of the song is repeated in the second half. The pervasive noncongruence between piano and voice epitomizes the incompatible designs of the two characters.

Implications

Brahms's departures from strophic formal designs are shown to be composerly choices that expose structural conflicts inherent in the poetry, particularly conflicts between the poetry's overt formal structure and the subtler rhythms in other domains of language. The analytical approach developed in this paper can also be used to explain Brahms's modified strophic designs, of which there are over one hundred.

Keywords

form, music hermeneutics, vocal music, music and poetry

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