

The *Liebeslieder Walzer*, op. 52, of Johannes Brahms: Rhythmic and Metric Features, and Related Conducting Gestures

by Glen Olsen



The musical language of Johannes Brahms (1833–97) demonstrates extraordinary technique and craft. His expressive use of melody, imaginative use of harmony, and his understanding of contrapuntal techniques attest to this. One area in which Brahms shows remarkable achievement is in musical motion, both rhythmic and metric. From the beginning of a work, through its development of musical ideas, to its final conclusion, Brahms controls the rhythmic and metric flow of his compositions. Whether developing a rhythmic idea, altering the metrical understanding, questioning an established meter, or articulating formal division, Brahms controls the movement of his music through time with great skill.

The study of early music played an important part in the development of Brahms's rhythmic and metric language. The scores Brahms collected confirm the fact that he labored extensively to understand the compositional procedures used in the music of the past, especially regarding melodic structure and rhythm. Virginia Hancock, in her study of Brahms's collection of early music, found that Brahms, in numerous folk songs, noted the "rhythmic patterns . . . do not conform with either original or editorial bar-lines."¹ In these folk songs, he noticed that actual rhythms do not correspond with notated meters, even when writing in different time signatures for some of them. Additionally, Walter Frisch mentions that when coming upon unbarred melodies, "[Brahms] carefully pondered what

meter or meters the text demanded . . . experimenting with barrings that yield various solutions in regular and mixed meters."² From his studies of early music, Brahms developed, in addition to harmonic and melodic compositional processes, rhythmic and metric devices that became a part of his musical lexicon; this rhythmic and metric language is evident in the *Liebeslieder Walzer*.

In a letter to his publisher friend Fritz Simrock, Brahms humorously writes: "I gladly risk being called an ass if our *Liebeslieder* don't give a few people pleasure."³ During the summer of 1869, spent near the Schumann family in Baden-Baden, Brahms composed the *Liebeslieder Walzer*, publishing them the following fall as Op. 52. In the same letter to Simrock, Brahms admits, "on this occasion, for the first time, I grinned at the sight of a work in print—of mine," and in subsequent letters promoted this work to other friends.⁴ Set to eighteen poems from Georg Friedrich Daumer's *Polydora* (a collection of Russian, Polish, and Hungarian folk poems), Brahms scored these waltzes for piano duet and vocal quartet. This voicing allowed the work performance possibilities on the concert stage and in the domestic parlor. Malcolm MacDonald, in his biography of Brahms, comments, "these works, in deliberately 'popular' style, were overwhelmingly responsible for spreading his reputation to the general music-buying public, and became the chief source of his personal wealth."⁵ Composed in a common music-making style (*hausmusik*, or informal singing around the piano), these dances immediately gained popularity with the Viennese public.

Previous analyses of the *Liebeslieder Walzer* concentrate on the melodic, harmonic, and structural traits.⁶ This article provides an examination of the rhythmic and metric features, and an analysis of the techniques Brahms uses to establish and

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control motion within his work, applying the appropriate conducting gesture for maximum communication of these features. The score opens with the marking *Im Ländler tempo* [in the tempo of a Ländler], and the performer instantly understands the requirements for a successful interpretation. Always looking for precision in the definition of musical motion, Brahms obliges the performer: *Im Ländler tempo* defines the pace for the music, and the metric and rhythmic structure of the composition. Although maintaining the triple meter throughout, to ensure the popularity of these waltzes Brahms determines to go further. In ad-

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dition to the melodic and harmonic construction of each song, he works within

the triple meter to alter the rhythmic and metric comprehension of his music. Whether developing a rhythmic idea, modifying the metric perception, or articulating formal division, Brahms uses the tools of musical motion to create a composition that goes beyond simple melodic and harmonic understanding.

Metric Conflict

The first song, *Rede Mädchen, allzu liebes* [Tell me, maiden, dearly loved one], opens with a popular device used in the waltz; the quarter-note rhythmic pattern of the *secondo* establishes the characteristic triple meter for a *Ländler*. The familiar “oom-pah-pah”—the root played on the downbeat, followed by the triad on the next two beats—introduces the first song. Conducting this waltz seems fairly simple—a three pattern in a moderate tempo, as Brahms counsels.⁷ The harmonic rhythm, though, supports a hypermeasure of $\frac{6}{4}$ ($\frac{3}{4} + \frac{3}{4}$, the bass reinforcing a triple subdivision of the beat) throughout most of this song. This hypermeasure and its rhythmic possibilities create a metric depiction of the conflict within the text of the poem: the impassioned man is unsure of the woman’s response to his desire.

In this waltz, Brahms first employs syncopation to construct a more intricate metric scheme. After establishing the *Ländler* in the *secondo*, the *primo* enters in the second measure with a subtle syncopation in the left hand (Figure 1), weakening the downbeat of the third measure. Repetition of this would begin to challenge our metric understanding. Brahms does not do this; he has another purpose in mind.

The first stanza opens with a metrical dispute. As shown above, the harmonic and melodic rhythms support the triple meter of the waltz. Although Brahms frequently employs syncopation to dispute an established meter, he phrases groups of notes in a way that adds doubt to the metric definition. The *primo* enters with syncopation in the left hand, and at the same time the phrasing of its melody in the right hand is in a $\frac{4}{4}$ metric pattern. Strengthening this new meter through the syncopation (which weakens the bar line), Brahms introduces a duple-triple metric conflict into this song almost immedi-

Figure 1. Brahms, *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Op. 52, Nr 1, mm. 1–6

Figure 2. Brahms, *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Op. 52, Nr 1, first and third lines, first stanza (mm. 2–5 and 10–13)

Figure 3. Brahms, *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Op. 52, Nr 5, mm. 1–6

ately. With the new $\frac{4}{4}$ meter introduced and sufficiently reinforced, Brahms eliminates the syncopation, sequences the $\frac{4}{4}$ melodic motive, alternating it between the right hand of the *primo* and *secondo* (Figure 1).

The compound meter of the $\frac{6}{4}$ hypermeasure redefines the rhythm as either a duple or triple subdivision of the beat, adding one more element to this "dispute." The use of cross rhythms and hemiola in this compound meter defines either a duple rhythmic subdivision in $\frac{3}{2}$ or a triple rhythmic subdivision in $\frac{6}{4}$. With the harmonic rhythm spacing two bars, Brahms creates this hypermeasure and challenges metrical comprehension in the melody. If we were to follow Brahms's practice of rebarring (from his study of early music), we would be successful in defining a $\frac{3}{2}$ metrical pattern within the first and third lines of this stanza (Figure 2). While the ear clearly hears the melody in a triple meter, a duple pattern, already sounding in the accompaniment and now suggested in the melody, allows Brahms to portray uncertainty of a response to the lover's feelings, metrically speaking.

For the conductor to communicate this conflict effectively, the opening of *Rede Mädchen*, *allzu liebes* should make use of hypermetric patterns. Hypermetric conducting hints at the duple-triple metric conflict and reinforces melodic phrasing. In fact, conducting the harmonic rhythm of the first two measures in $\frac{6}{4}$ (or in one to the bar—two measures of $\frac{3}{4}$) and then switching to a $\frac{3}{2}$ pattern for two hypermeasures (mm. 3–6) results in conducting mixed meters for the first stanza. Continuing in one ($\frac{3}{4}$) for two measures (mm. 7–8), the duple rhythmic subdivision of $\frac{3}{2}$ returns for three more hypermeasures (mm. 9–14). Once again, two measures of $\frac{3}{4}$ (mm. 15–16), with a more active harmonic rhythm, combine with one final hypermeasure of $\frac{3}{2}$ to close this stanza. The second and third stanzas settle down: the exploration becomes more precise and the girl's response more definite. The $\frac{3}{4}$ meter continues throughout (with possible $\frac{3}{2}$ insertions at mm. 25–26 and 41–42 between the second and third lines), and these stanzas should be conducted in one.

In contrast to a subtle hemiola in the first stanza of *Rede Mädchen*, Brahms em-

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plays a conventional hemiola throughout the second song, *Am Gesteine rauscht die Flut* [Over the rocks rushes the torrent]. Conducting the anacrusis in $\frac{3}{4}$, the conductor should continue in a subdivided $\frac{3}{2}$, inserting $\frac{3}{4}$ patterns at mm. 5, 8(9), and 20–21(22); this subdivision further heightens an agitation within the text.

Metric Counterpoint

To add to metric conflicts already encountered, Brahms, beginning with the

fifth song, uses another technique of musical motion to a greater degree. Metric displacement moves the meter off an established bar line or introduces a contradicting meter against the one already defined. Through rhythmic devices, pitch structures, or phrasing, the defined meter becomes ambiguous, shifting the metric accent to other beats within the measure and further weakening the bar line. The first song already employed a slight form of metrical displacement (the $\frac{4}{4}$ phrasing, reinforced by the syncopation in the second and third measures) by simply lengthening the phrase one beat. Now, in the fifth song, Brahms shifted the bar line to create contrapuntal forms within the domain of music motion.

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Using the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, he begins on an anacrusis in the left hand of the *secondo* with a pair of slurred quarter notes followed by a quarter rest, continuing this pattern (with an interruption between the first and second sentences) for the first two stanzas. The articulation of the slur places the stress on the first of the two quarter notes, making the notated upbeat sound like a downbeat. The second voice enters on the second beat of the second measure (right hand of the *secondo*) with the same articulation. The third voice (soprano and alto duet, reinforced by the *primo*), enters immediately (one beat) after the second voice on a true anacrusis,

Brodbeck shows that Brahms achieved a progression from one dance to the next in Op. 39 by making most of them "metrically continuous."

Figure 4. Diagram of the metrical canon (Brahms, Op. 52, Nr 5, mm. 1-6)

for now the metrical accent is firmly established in bar 3 with the downbeat. This canon continues throughout the first two stanzas of the poem and may be diagrammed as in Figure 4.

In conducting this canon, the conductor should simply maintain the pulse, with no metric pattern, in the right hand and cue each entrance of the canon with the left hand. This gesture has been suggested as a possible way of conducting the intricate counterpoint and complex rhythmic structure of Renaissance music. All Brahms has done is to portray the complex and intricate weaving of the "green tendrils of the vine" metrically. Once the meter is established with the entrance of the voices, the right hand may begin with a $\frac{3}{4}$ pattern or continue conducting the pulse.

Metric Continuity

An interesting situation occurs between the eleventh and twelfth waltzes of this cycle. The nonsense of *Nein, es nicht zu auszukommen* [No, there is no getting along with the crowd] is ended by the demand in *Schlosser auf* [Locksmith, come]. Some performances have eliminated the pause between these two songs. Connecting these waltzes should be done, since the two texts are linked together and a pause between numbers eleven and twelve would weaken the dramatic effect of the poetry at this point in the cycle.

The seventh waltz, *Wohl schön bewandt war es* [It was so wonderful before], creates a problem within this cycle; solving it requires the same performance as desired between *Nein, es nicht zu auszukommen* and *Schlosser auf*. A touching poem of love growing cold, the C-minor tonality of the seventh waltz, although fitting for the subject matter, seems awkward following the A-major tonality of the previous waltz, *Ein kleiner hübscher Vogel* [A little, charming bird]. If we perceive the previous song as having some form of closure to it, the awkward tonal shift may be diminished by an extended pause between numbers six and seven. This pause, though, is inadequate. Truly unique about *Wohl schön bewandt war es* is its rhythmic dimension: Brahms has one beat too many. The song begins with an anacrusis and ends with a complete measure, adding an extra beat to the music. This

Figure 5. Brahms, *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Op. 52, Nr 6, mm. 109-111 and Nr 7, mm. 1-2

anacrusis, with its accompanying phrasing, also produces a metric displacement in the *primo* and creates another canon with the *secondo* (reminiscent of number five).

David Brodbeck, in his dissertation on the Schubertian influence in Brahms, noticed something in an almost identical work composed five years earlier. Conceived as a continuous work from beginning to end, the Op. 39 waltzes for piano duet give some clues to solving this problem in the seventh song of the *Liebeslieder Walzer*. Brodbeck shows that Brahms achieved a progression from one dance to the next in Op. 39 by making most of them "metrically continuous."⁸ The example he uses comes from the first and second dances:

Because it begins with an anacrusis of three eighth notes, number one should end with a dotted-quarter note. Brahms ended the dance with a half note instead, thereby allowing a smooth transition to the following

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number, which begins with a quarter-note anacrusis. Clearly, the composer wanted no temporal or metrical disjunction between consecutive pieces.⁹

The same rhythmic characteristic occurs between the sixth and seventh songs of the *Liebeslieder Walzer*. Ending *Ein kleiner, hübscher Vogel* on a half note al-

lows the anacrusis of *Wohl schön bewandt war es* to be included within the last measure of the previous song (Figure 5).

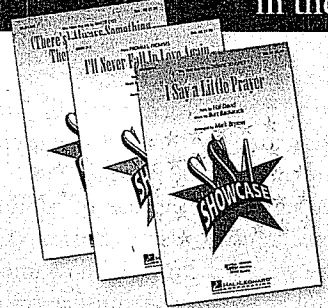
Metric continuity helps to explain the extra beat, but it does not add to our understanding of the striking tonal differences between these two movements. A major and C minor are distantly related keys; modulating from one to the next can be an extended process, yet Brahms does this within one beat (the extra beat) and through a non-harmonic tone (the sixth degree of the C-minor scale). Beginning with a note that does not belong to either tonic or dominant harmony, the seventh waltz uses a chromatic descent through a common tone to accomplish the modulation. The chromatic descent from the root of the final chord in the previous song (A), moves through A^b to the dominant note (G) in C minor. An enharmonic spelling of the A^b (6 in C minor) to G# (7 in A major) produces this common-tone modulation.

Brodbeck points out that in the second half of the song, "Brahms sidesteps

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an implied cadence (mm. 16–17) in A major by changing the note G# to Ab.¹⁰ Repeating the chromatic descent and writing out the enharmonic spelling (G#/Ab) at a later point in the song reinforces, through repetition, the translation of the extra note into a common-tone modulation.

Conducting this metric continuity requires maintenance of the tempo right up to the last measure of *Ein kleiner, hübscher Vogel*. In this final measure the tempo

should ritard for the two beats of the chord, making the anacrusis of *Wohl schön bewandt war es* the third beat of the measure and bringing the pulse, through the ritard, to the tempo of the seventh waltz.

The thirteenth waltz changes the agitation of the demands made in the twelfth waltz to a longing, yet simple, request: peace of heart. *Vögelein durchrauscht die Luft* [Little bird flutters through the air] compares a little bird's longing to the desire of the lover's heart. Just as the bird

searches for a branch to find rest, so does the lover search for another heart. The *primo* musically flutters around in pairs of sixteenth notes; the *secondo* uses hemiola against this in the right hand (mm. 1–4), making us search for either a $\frac{3}{4}$ or a $\frac{3}{2}$ metrical pattern. Triple meter establishes itself by the fifth measure, only to have the hemiola return again in the *primo* (mm. 13), when the heart is searching for peace. By maintaining a diatonic structure, the melody does almost no searching; harmonically, Brahms preserves a tonal structure throughout, searching only once, through a rising chromatic bass line, for a tonal center (mm. 9–12). However, the search occurs within the rhythmic-metric devices Brahms employs.

Conclusion

It is hoped these few examples help clarify our understanding of Brahms's use of motion in the *Liebeslieder Walzer*. The conductor of this work must pay attention to what Brahms is doing rhythmically and respond with appropriate gestures to communicate what is happening in the music. Where Brahms employs mixed meters through the rhythmic patterns he creates, the conductor needs to show this. Hemiola should be conducted hypermetrically to highlight the rhythmic and metric conflicts in the music, and cross rhythms, prevalent within this work, should reflect a beat pattern that reinforces the rhythmic subdivisions of the meter. Beyond this, the type of conducting pattern will be determined primarily through the rhythmic interpretation of the passage.

Writing about the use of motion in Brahms's music, David Epstein states: "His music is structured with an uncanny sense for making what must happen inevitably happen, and what must move, move."¹¹ Conducting the rhythmic patterns, while taking into account the metric changes of the *Liebeslieder Walzer*, helps capture this essence of Brahms's music. The shape of the gesture controls the sound and effectively communicates or, better yet, paints an accurate picture of how the music of the *Liebeslieder Walzer* moves.

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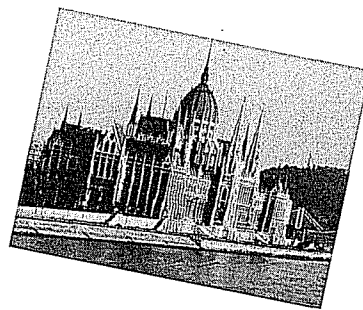
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Notes

- ¹ Virginia Hancock, "The Growth of Brahms's Interest in Early Choral Music, and its Effect on His Own Choral Compositions," *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, ed. Robert Pascall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 31. The various songs marked in this way include: 1) *Ulrich* from Kretschmer/Zuccalmaglio (Vol. II, No. 15), 2) *Mein G'müth ist mir verwirret* by Hassler (later made famous as *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*), 3) *Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen* by Isaac (later known as *O Welt, ich muss dich lassen* in chorale form), and 4) Scandello's setting of *Schein uns, du liebe Sonne*.
- ² Walter Frisch, "The Shifting Bar Line: Metrical Displacement in Brahms," *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George Bozarth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149.
- ³ Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 396.
- ⁴ Letters to Hermann Deiters (September, 1869) and to Brahms's father, Johann Jakob (February 1870), where Brahms

asks if his former composition and piano teacher, Eduard Marxsen, had received copies of the waltzes (Avins, *Letters*, 402–403).

⁵ Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 191.

⁶ For these analyses see Shirley Ann Neugebauer's dissertation, "The *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, Op. 52, of Johannes Brahms: A Conductor's Analysis"; David Brodbeck's dissertation, "Brahms as Editor and Composer: His Two Editions of *Ländler* by Schubert and His First Two Cycles of *Waltzes*, Opera 39 and 52" and essay, "Compatibility, Coherence, and Closure in Brahms's *Liebeslieder Waltzes*" in *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Leonard B. Meyer*; and the third chapter in Lucien Stark's book, *Brahms's Vocal Duets and Quartets with Piano* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁷ Brahms to Ernst Rudorff (January 1870): "I do not need to mention the tempo is actually that of a *Ländler*: moderate. Particularly the livelier ones, moderate (C minor, A minor), please don't drag the more sentimental ones, hop-tendrils."

(Avins, *Letters*, 402)

⁸ David Brodbeck, "Brahms as Editor and Composer: His Two Editions of *Ländler* by Schubert and His First Two Cycles of *Waltzes*, Opera 39 and 52." Ph.D. dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1984), 113.

⁹ Brodbeck, "Brahms as Editor and Composer," 114.

¹⁰ David Brodbeck, "Compatibility, Coherence, and Closure in Brahms's *Liebeslieder Waltzes*," *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Leonard B. Meyer*, ed. Eugene Norman and Ruth A. Solie (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1988), 429.

¹¹ David Epstein, "Brahms and the Mechanisms of Motion: the Composition of Performance," *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George Bozarth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 198.

—CJ—