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Rhetoric and Justification in Analysis:
A Commentary on Eric Wen's Commentary

REFERENCES: Samuel Ng, "[Review of Peter H. Smith, *Expressive Forms in Brahms's Instrumental Music: Structure and Meaning in His Werther Quartet*](#)," *Music Theory Online* 13.4; Eric Wen, "[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*](#)," *Music Theory Online* 14.1.

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ABSTRACT: This commentary discusses the Schenkerian interpretation of the opening of Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 3, earlier addressed by Samuel Ng and Eric Wen in this journal. It argues that the central question at issue—the location of the structural IV–V motion—is clarified by factors such as rhythm, meter, register, instrumentation, and tonal expectations. Aspects of complexity are also identified, including Brahms's way of giving divergent structural meanings to an inherently ambiguous passage by setting it in different contexts.

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[1] In the previous issue of *Music Theory Online*, Eric Wen attacks Samuel Ng's reading of the opening of Brahms's Piano Quartet no. 3, presented in Ng's review of Peter Smith's monograph of this work. While Wen calls Ng's interpretation "surely incorrect," I find his discussion lacking in arguments that would justify such surety. Since Wen's discussion raises important questions about analytical justification and analytical rhetoric, I believe a comment on Wen's comment may be worthwhile.

[2] The main difference between Ng's **Example 1.** Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 3, mm. 1–27, three conceptions of bass line hierarchy

and Wen's views concerns the location of the structural dominant in the opening large progression

(mm. 1–32); see Example 1 for an annotated score of mm. 1–27.

Ng criticizes Smith's

reading of the G major chord in m. 21 as the dominant,

suggesting that the dominant

only appears in m. 27. Wen, on

the other hand, agrees with

Smith in this issue, but

criticizes both Smith and Ng

of overlooking "an important

Classical tonal



(click to enlarge and see the rest)

Example 2. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 3, three readings of harmonic structure

(a) Wen's reading:

(b) reading based on Ng's bass-line hierarchy:

(c) My suggestion:

(click to enlarge)

procedure” in their analyses. This procedure relates to the restatement of the opening idea in B \flat minor in m. 11 ff. Example 2a (combining relevant parts of Wen’s Examples 9 and 10), illustrates his conception of the B \flat minor chord as part of a descending chromatic 5–6 progression leading to a IV⁶. The basic progression is similar to that at the opening of Beethoven’s “Waldstein” Sonata, one of the classical

precedents that Wen discusses in his commentary.

[3] While Wen's discussion of classical precedents is interesting, it by no means settles the issue of the dominant's location in the Brahms passage. From Ng's voice-leading graph (his Example 7) we may infer that his conception of the underlying harmonic framework is, in fact, essentially similar to Wen's.

Example 2b presents a reading whose bass-line framework is extracted from Ng's graph (his Example 7); the counterpointing upper voices are supplied by the present author (Ng's graph is less clear in this respect). In both Example 2a and 2b, the B \flat minor chord (\flat VII \flat) functions as an intermediate element between I and IV, which then goes on to V. (The G-major and F-major \sharp chords of

Example 2a are replaced by root-position chords in Example 2b, but this does not affect the basic meaning of this framework.)⁽¹⁾

[4] The primary difference between Ng's and Wen's readings thus does not concern the underlying harmonic framework but the timing of its elements. According to Wen, the structural IV–V motion occurs mm. 20–21; according to Ng it occurs in mm. 25–27.

Example 1 illustrates the alternative views of harmonic hierarchy by note names, boxes, and parentheses beneath the score. The invocation of classical precedents is clearly insufficient for assessing the merits of these two readings. Instead, we have to study the compositional features in the Brahms score to see what they suggest with respect to this issue.

[5] I submit that such features hardly warrant contending that the first F–G bass motion (mm. 20–21) is “surely” the decisive one. In view of the great rhetorical

weight of the opening C and B \flat (mm. 1–2 and 11–12), this motion seems too incongruously fleeting to function convincingly in the harmonic framework, overriding the B \flat in structural priority. To be more precise, factors of rhythm, register, and instrumentation ally to support a perception of the later F–G motion (mm. 25–27) as more decisive, in accordance with Ng’s reading. The F–G motion is rhythmically more pronounced in mm. 25–27, and the long note values associate with the opening C and B \flat , as does the resumption of the original low register and the return of the piano.

[6] While these factors support Ng’s locating the IV–V motion in mm. 25–27, they also suggest modifying one aspect in his reading. Ng indicates the F bass as prolonged from the end of m. 20 to m. 24 through its neighbors G and G \flat . The structural

Example 3. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 3, mm. 1–32, voice-leading sketch



(click to enlarge and see the rest)

status of the first F (m. 20), however, fails to be supported by rhythm, register, or instrumentation. On the basis of these factors, this F would be more logically interpreted as a local dominant back-related to the preceding B ♭. This reading is illustrated in Example 1 (lowest line), Example 2c, and, in more detail, Example 3 (which

shows notes
in their actual
registers).⁽²⁾

[7] Tonal expectations constitute another significant factor. Here Ng's and Wen's perspectives differ sharply. On the basis of the local tonicization of B \flat minor in mm. 11–20, Ng finds the subsequent G-major chord in m. 21 unexpected, “defying normative harmonic logic.” Wen, by contrast, calls it the “long-expected dominant,” thus invoking the global perspective of C minor. Both the local B \flat -minor and the global C-minor perspectives are, I would suggest, pertinent for the perceptive listener, as illustrated beneath the graph in Example 3. In terms of modulation technique, the underlying idea is the use of the F-major chord as a pivot, the V of B \flat minor turning into the IV \sharp of C minor. The F⁷–G motion in mm. 20–21 (Wen's IV–V) suggests such a reinterpretation, but a more decisive occurrence of such an event takes place in mm. 25–27, after the prominent re-establishment of F as the dominant of B \flat minor (VI–V – in mm. 23–25). In addition to rhythm, register, and instrumentation, such an impression is supported by tonal expectations. As Ng correctly observes, the first G-major chord (m. 21) is locally prepared by no elements pointing outside the key area of B \flat minor. By contrast, the second G-major chord (m. 27) is prepared by a chromatic passing chord—an “inverted Italian 6th”—that unmistakably signals the upcoming dominant.

[8] Citing Marianne Kielian-Gilbert's expression, one might describe these events as an “oscillation” between B \flat -minor and C-minor perspectives.⁽³⁾ As discussed above, however, various compositional factors suggest a hierarchy for such an oscillation: the local establishment of C minor in mm. 20–21 functions within a larger B \flat minor context, which, of course, functions within a yet larger C minor context (see Example 3). Despite the difference in hierarchical level, the G-major chord in m. 21 bears

significant associational relationships with those in mm. 9–10 and m. 27, recalling the former and foreshadowing the latter. Such associations are especially important for explaining how an unlikely instance of double mixture such as $\flat VI \flat$ —“defying normative harmonic logic”—manages to make a meaningful effect within the $B \flat$ minor context.⁽⁴⁾ As shown by brackets in Example 3, the top-voice motion $D \flat - D \flat$ (mm. 21–23) echoes the implicit top-voice motion linking the first two phrases; this chromatic relationship is also reflected in other details.



[9] Wen should be credited for one substantial observation in his Brahms analysis, concerning a parallelism between the *faux bourdon* progressions in each of the two opening phrases. Wen’s graph illustrating this feature (from his Example 9) is reproduced here as Example 4a. While a study of this parallelism reveals interesting compositional aspects, it does not support Wen’s

Example 4. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 3, rhythmic treatment of “parallelistic” progressions

The image shows a musical score for Brahms' Piano Quartet No. 3. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The treble staff contains a melodic line with notes and stems. The bass staff contains a bass line with notes and stems. Above the treble staff, there are circled numbers 3, 9, 13, 17, 20, and 21, connected by a dotted line. Below the bass staff, there are numbers 5, (6), 5, and 6, and harmonic labels I, "bVIIb", IV⁶, IV⁷, and V^b. The notes in both staves are connected by stems, indicating a close relationship between the two parts.

(click to enlarge and see the rest)

reading of structural relationships but rather highlights features that speak against it.

[10] In contrast to a classical model such as Beethoven's "Waldstein"—in which the parallelism between the I–IV⁶ and ♭ VII–IV⁶ progressions in mm. 1–8 is based on literal repetition—Brahms has composed the latter part of this parallelism so as to weaken considerably its “goal” F-major . Example 4b illustrates how the two -chord progressions correspond with the actual music. The goal chord of the

first progression, G major (m. 9–10), is emphasized by its strong metrical position, long duration, and root position, but the corresponding F-major F^{\flat} (m. 20) is deprived of all these features. The treatment of meter is especially interesting: the F-major F^{\flat} occurs at the weak third beat in a hemiola. Such an attenuation of the F-major F^{\flat} is at odds with Wen's notion of this chord as not only equivalent to the G-major chord of the first phrase but structurally surpassing all elements that have occurred since the opening I.

[11] While the F^{\flat} -chord progression of the second phrase may have been modeled on that of the first, it is thus transformed in a way that undermines the goal status of the

F-major chord in m. 20 and necessitates the more pronounced approach to this harmony in mm. 22–24. As indicated in Example 4 (uppermost stave), the VI–V progression (G^{\flat} –F) may be understood as a kind of compensation for the $\frac{5}{3}$ chords weakened by the hemiola rhythm in 19–20. This idea is supported by the way in which the chromatic parallel minor thirds in mm. 21–25 repeat those in the hemiola passage (see circles in Example 4b).⁽⁵⁾ Moreover, the rhythm of the bass figure in mm. 21–22 and 23–24—three quarter notes followed by a long note—suggests a correspondence with the rhythm leading to the closing V chord of the first phrase (mm. 8–9), accentuating the G^{\flat} and F basses (mm. 22 and 24), and supporting the perception of the latter as the true goal of the \flat VII–IV motion (= I–V in B^{\flat} minor).⁽⁶⁾

[12] All in all, while Wen bases his discussion on classical models such as the “Waldstein,” his Brahms reading fails to follow such a model in one significant respect. To cite Carl Schachter, “it is as much a part of the composer’s art as it is of the sculptor’s or painter’s to be able to create clear and distinct shapes.”⁽⁷⁾ At the opening of the “Waldstein,” a “clear and distinct shape” of structural connections is secured by features such as the unified chromatically descending bass, the lucid parallelism between the I–V⁶ (mm. 1–4) and \flat VII–IV⁶ (mm. 4–8) progressions, the strong emphasis on the dominant (mm. 9–13), and the effect of the preparatory A–A \flat inflection (m. 7–8) in dispelling the impression of preceding local tonicizations. While the structural framework in Wen’s Brahms analysis is formed by elements similar to those in the “Waldstein” theme, one seeks in vain for equivalent clarifying factors that would secure the connection between these elements and the hierarchy among them. As suggested by the above discussion, however, the fault does not lie in Brahms’s art—as if he were a bad emulator of Beethoven—but in the analysis. A closer attention to factors such as rhythm, register, instrumentation, and tonal expectations leads us to discover a shape that is as “clear and distinct” as Beethoven’s—albeit more complex.

[13] Finally, despite arguing for a “clear and distinct” prolongational hierarchy in the Brahms passage, I would like to point out an aspect of ambiguity in one of its constituent parts.⁽⁸⁾ While there is evidence that the G-major chord in m. 21 does not yet represent the structural dominant, this evidence is based entirely on the impact of the preceding events. If one considers the passage of mm. 21–27 in isolation, there is nothing to contradict Wen’s notion of it as embodying a prolongation of V. Its design is reasonably unified, and the steadily descending long notes in the top voice could well be heard as forming a third-progression moving from the fifth to the third of the G-major triad. Hence this passage is inherently ambiguous: it can fulfill divergent prolongational functions, depending on the context. Brahms, rather characteristically, takes advantage of such ambiguity. While the G-major chord in m. 21 is too weakly prepared and expressed to establish the structural dominant, this passage reappears in the recapitulation *preceded* by a strongly established dominant (mm. 217 ff.). In such a context it actually participates in a dominant prolongation.

[14] The main purpose of this commentary is not to offer, at last, a “correct” reading of the Brahms passage. Its main purpose is to give an idea of the kind of musical factors that should be allowed for in approaching a “correct” or descriptive reading. Apart from its observations of parallelism, Wen’s discussion shows little concern for such factors. Its critique of Ng’s reading is based on presumptuous rhetoric (“surely incorrect”) rather than rational arguments about the music. Such a manner of discussion is not without precedents in Schenkerian literature, but it is an unfortunate tinge in an otherwise valuable tradition. A more solid attention to analytical justification would certainly benefit the Schenkerian cause and its contribution to musical understanding.