

Adam Ricci\*

The Progress of a Motive  
in Brahms' s Intermezzo  
op. 119, no. 3\*

ABSTRACT: Brahms's Intermezzo op. 119, no. 3 is structured around a motive with two components—one melodic, one harmonic—that operate sometimes separately and sometimes together. The global harmonic trajectory of the piece is embodied in the combination of these two components; local harmonic motion proceeds through an expanded LR-cycle, with periodic short cuts from one zone of the cycle to another. The A section unfolds a double-tonic complex while introducing chromatic pitch classes in a carefully planned order; the B section is densely chromatic, featuring interlocking transpositions of the harmonic component. Rhythmic transformations of the motive are also addressed, including a previously unnoted motivic connection with op. 119, no. 2.

KEYWORDS: motive, Grundgestalt, Brahms, double-tonic complex, Intermezzo

*Received January 2007*

---

[1] Johannes Brahms's skill with motivic development is well known. Beginning with Arnold Schoenberg's famous essay "Brahms the Progressive,"<sup>(1)</sup> analysts have demonstrated time and time again the masterful ways in which Brahms manipulates his motivic ideas.

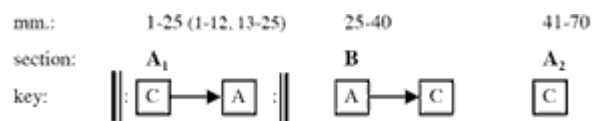
[2] Motivic development is especially concentrated in the late piano music op. 116 through 119, written in 1892 and 1893. About op. 118, no. 6, for instance, John Rink (1999, 97) writes that "to characterize [this piece] as a motive in search of a tonic would hardly do justice to the tremendous dramatic impulse generated by Brahms's incessant reharmonizations of the almost ubiquitous melodic shape." Notable about many of these pieces is the extreme economy of material: the way in which a single idea is transformed in myriad ways.<sup>(2)</sup>

[3] Among the op. 119 pieces, No. 1 has received the most analytic attention.<sup>(3)</sup> Op. 119, no. 2 has also been studied at length, particularly for its re-casting of a six-pitch motto introduced in the A section in the B section.<sup>(4)</sup> The literature on Nos. 3 and 4 is relatively scant, however, quite possibly for opposite reasons: whereas No. 4 is the longest, weightiest and most complex in the set, No. 3 is, at least on the surface, the most innocuous. No. 4 is treated in a recent dissertation by Samuel Ng and a paper by Frank Samarotto;<sup>(5)</sup> the only relatively comprehensive analysis of No. 3 is in a dissertation by Camilla Cai.<sup>(6)</sup> The lighthearted mood of No. 3 masks an underlying sophistication: the piece is remarkable, not only for its economy of material, but also for its use of a double-tonic complex and its serial ordering of chromatic pitch classes, two musical procedures not usually associated with the music of Brahms.<sup>(7)</sup> That the motive is exclusively diatonic places the chromaticism into especial relief.

[4] Like many of the late piano pieces (and like the first two in op. 119), the Intermezzo is in ternary form, as shown in Example 1. Section A<sub>1</sub> is in two nearly identical parts, each of which progresses from C major to A major; the B section moves from A major back to C major; and section A<sub>2</sub> is exclusively in C.

[5] In its first appearance, the motive embodies these two keys, which in section A<sub>1</sub> form a double-tonic complex. Before examining the


### Example 1. The Form



(click to enlarge)

### Example 2. The Two Components of the Motive

(click to enlarge)

double-tonic complex in more detail, we must first examine the motive itself. It consists of the melodic cell and harmonic progression given in Example 2. The melodic cell, labeled “J”, consists of the interval pattern ascending 3rd, ascending 2nd and descending 2nd. A clef is omitted from the first part of the example because J appears in different scale locations in different parts of the piece. J’s first occurrence begins on .

[6] The harmonic component of the motive is dubbed “DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH” after its constituent root motions. In all statements of this harmonic progression, the descending third is diatonic—the quality of the third depending upon the quality of the starting chord—and the ascending fifth is perfect. In this first appearance, the descending third is minor. Moreover, the total pitch-class content of the

progression in its first appearance is diatonic.

[7] The melodic cell and harmonic progression—J and DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH—sometimes occur independently, but for the most part interact to create a larger unit. This larger unit, given at the bottom of Example 2, is the motive of my title.<sup>(8)</sup> Again, the fact that the motive is exclusively diatonic is significant, because it makes the chromatic pitch classes especially salient.

[8] The opening of the piece animates the motive by repeating and varying the duration of J while arpeggiating the chords of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH.

Example 3 annotates the melody of m. 1 through the downbeat of m. 3, which fuses together three Js.<sup>(9)</sup> By fusing together three Js and altering the duration of the final pitch of each J (the durations are  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{4}$ , and  $\frac{1}{2}$ , for the three occurrences, respectively), Brahms creates a symmetrical rhythmic structure.<sup>(10)</sup> The dots below the staff indicate metric position: two dots indicate a strong beat, one dot a weak beat.<sup>(11)</sup> The first J

**Example 3.** Rhythmic Setting of *J*, mm. 1–3



(click to enlarge)

starts on a *strong* beat and concludes on a *weak* beat. The third J starts on a *weak* beat and concludes on a *strong* beat. The middle J begins and ends on a weak part of two different beats. This rhythmic organization marks the beginning and ending of thrice-J as points of departure and arrival.<sup>(12)</sup> Furthermore, mm. 1–3 constitute a single hypermeasure: the sequence beginning in m. 4 retrospectively marks that measure as a hypermetric downbeat, segregating mm. 1–3.

[9] The textural and harmonic context also support hearing mm. 1–3 as a unit. The melody, beginning with thrice-J, is in an inner voice, played by the inside of the pianist’s right hand. The upper voices support the rhythmic structure just discussed, with dotted quarter notes at the conclusion of the first and third instances of J only. Harmonically, the conclusion of thrice-J coincides with the conclusion of the first DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH. In the first two statements of J, the third pitch (A) is not harmonized; rather, it is an upper neighbor to the chordal 5th. But in the third statement of J, when A descends to G it pulls C down to B, and the bass complies: the bass pattern in m. 3 is a transposition up a 3rd of that in mm. 1 and 2. Consequently, the last eighth of m. 2 sounds more like an independent harmony—a bona fide A-minor triad—than the “mere” neighbors in the first two Js. Put another way: while the first two inner-voice As are complete neighbors to the 5th of the tonic triad, the third A bridges two different harmonies, C major and E minor.<sup>(13)</sup> In dramatic terms, it

is as if the incessant repetition of J induces the harmonic motion across the barline of mm. 2–3. To paraphrase Schoenberg, pitch class A is the 搥onal problem?of the piece, creating an imbalance that the rest of the piece serves to rectify.<sup>(14)</sup>

[10] J’s suggestion of an A-minor harmony is played out by the music that follows. The keys of C major and A minor (later inflected to major) “compete” with each other, interacting in a double-tonic complex.<sup>(15)</sup> In m. 3 (pickup to beat 2), J begins a fourth time but does not complete the neighbor figure; instead, the melody continues upward ~~5–6–7–8~~, forcing the upper voices to shift upward. The voice that descended from C to B (on the downbeat of m. 3) has thus returned to C; the right hand plays a C-major triad, seemingly assenting to the C-major tonic and banishing the problem pitch class A. But the bass, instead of returning to C as well, moves to A—belatedly reinforcing the persistent A in the right-hand part of mm. 1–2. The sonority on the downbeat of m. 4 is ACEG, the combination of an A-minor triad and C-major triad.

[11] This “miscommunication” between the hands continues. The left-hand part in mm. 4–5 seemingly tries to establish A minor with the bass line ~~1–6–4–5~~, and the right-hand part articulates a sequence that descends by step beginning in m. 4, landing on an A-minor triad in m. 6. But A minor’s leading tone, G<sup>#</sup>, is notably absent in the second half of m. 5 (in both parts), and the left hand plays C instead of A on the downbeat of m. 6.<sup>(16)</sup> Essentially, the two hands have exchanged places here relative to the downbeat of m. 4. Up until this point, the piece contains not a single chromatic pitch class.

[12] Two dovetailed sequences—incorporating significant alterations—occur in mm. 4–12, a passage whose hypermeter is the most complex of the

**Example 4.** A Prototype for mm. 4–12




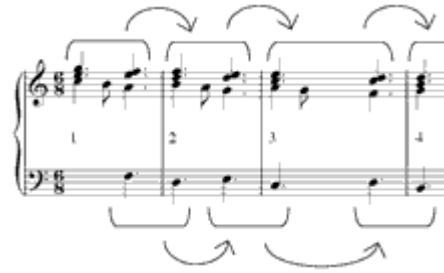
(click to enlarge)

piece. The alterations introduce the first chromatic pitch classes. Example 4 sets the stage for discussing these alterations by providing a 4-measure (and 4-hyperbeat) prototype for mm. 4–12 that ends with a half cadence. The prototype removes the A-vs.-C conflict at the beginning of m. 4 by transposing the circled bass pitches up a 3rd, and cadences on the dominant in m. 7, removing the large phrase expansion in the music while also normalizing the irregular hypermeter of this section.<sup>(17)</sup> The sequence here continues the rhythmic pattern of the melody of m. 3.

[13] Example 5 approaches the musical score in two stages. In part a. is an unaltered sequence based on the music of mm. 4–5.<sup>(18)</sup> As shown at b., Brahms

**Example 5.** Sequence with Alterations, mm. 4?

alters the sequence by first repeating the chord in m. 6—indicated by the dotted portion of the curved brackets—and by changing E to E $\flat$ . E $\flat$ , significantly, is the first chromatic pitch class in the piece. The 7th chord expected on beat 2 of m. 6 is thus delayed until beat 1 of m. 7; this chord is chromatically altered as well, with F $\sharp$  substituting for the expected F $\flat$ . At the same time, this interruption of the first sequence restores the rhythmic pattern of the melody of m. 1.<sup>(19)</sup> The two chromatic pitch classes tonicize G, V of C, as F $\sharp$  alone does in the prototype.<sup>(20)</sup> Despite the G chord's position, the chord sounds like a tonic due to the cadential figure  in the inner-voice melody. For this reason, the prototype in Example 4 places the chord here in position; the melody's ascending-4th leap (m. 7, b. 2 of



(click to enlarge and see the rest)





chromatic pitch classes

introduced in mm. 4–10 act as agents in the double tonic complex.

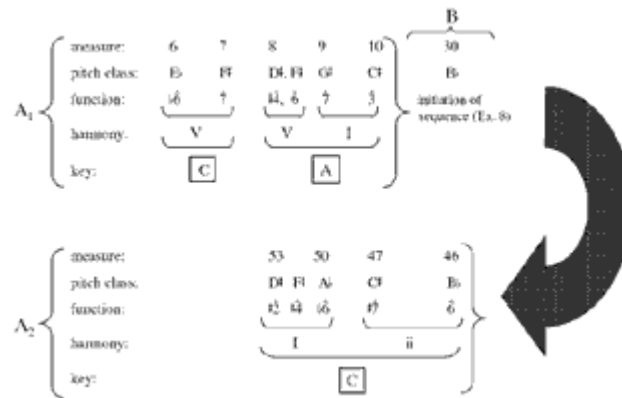
Example 6 collates these pitch classes, listing their location and harmonic

function. Witness again the pure diatonicism of mm. 1–6 (b. 1) and the context in which  $E\flat/D\sharp$  and

$F\sharp$  are introduced, first as agents of C's dominant, then as agents of A's dominant. Next to arrive are  $G\sharp$  and  $C\sharp$ . Only one pitch class— $B\flat$

/ $A\sharp$ —remains to

(First Appearance) and their Function



(click to enlarge)

be introduced; it arrives in m. 30, a significant harmonic juncture in the B section that I will return to momentarily.

[16] The second half of  $A_1$  is identical in pitches and rhythms to its first half until the last eighth of m. 23.<sup>(24)</sup> This time, the 4-3 suspension resolves within the beat; in place of the earlier line  $D-C^\sharp-C^\flat$  is  $C^\sharp-C^\flat-B$ , which continues to A at the beginning of the B section. The bass in the second half of m. 24 is changed from A to E

relative to m. 12,  
creating the first  
cadential in the  
piece, followed  
by the first strong  
cadence, in A  
major.

[17] After its prominent statement at the opening of each half of A<sub>1</sub>, the motive recedes from the foreground until section B; only its harmonic component, untransposed, remains present but not very prominent. The bass motions from A to E in mm. 4–5 (by way of intervening chords) and in mm. 8–9 echo the same motion in mm. 2–3. In the B section, the motive remains closer to the foreground; in particular, DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH is subject to a most remarkable working-out. The route from C major to A major was relatively straightforward; the route back is not so simple.

[18] In m. 25, thrice-J returns, but the lack of accompaniment, low register, and sudden *piano* undermine A major's big moment. J begins here on  $\bar{1}$  rather than  $\bar{3}$ , so J and DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH have been transposed by different intervals relative to m. 1: J is transposed down a 5th, while DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH is transposed down a minor 3rd. As shown in Example 7, mm. 25–29 outline a statement of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH beginning on A major and concluding on C $\sharp$  major; unlike the statements of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH in the A section, the concluding triad here is major rather than minor. This modal change makes the second and third chords of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH sound like tonic and dominant, respectively, a point I shall return to. Immediately following the completion of thrice-J in m. 27, the music of mm. 23 (b. 2)–24 returns, transposed up a major 3rd and with a thicker texture. In mm. 33–35, DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH appears down a half step relative to mm. 25–29, beginning on A $\flat$  major and ending on C major—again, note the



DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH relative to the opening, where the existence of an independent A-minor triad was only weakly implied.<sup>(27)</sup> The harmonic sequence ends in m. 33, but the pattern of overlapped DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTHs continues: the A $\flat$ -major triad in m. 33 is the initiating chord of the DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH that concludes the B section, mentioned earlier in connection with [Example 7](#). In this final DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH, *J* has disappeared; harmony trumps melody here. Relative to the interlocking DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTHs in mm. 30–33, this DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH is rhythmically augmented, with each harmony occupying one measure. The exclusive focus on harmony also crowds out any hypermetric ambiguity: mm. 25–40 comprise four 4-beat hypermeasures.

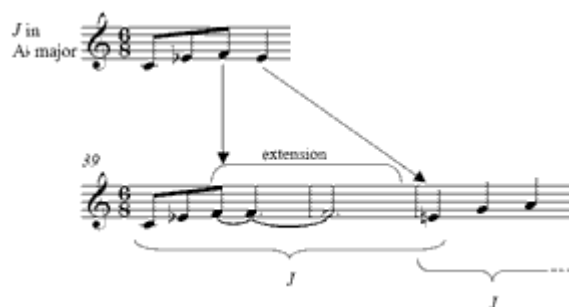
[20] As shown in Example 9, the underlying voice-leading pattern established by the sequence continues beyond the conclusion of the sequence (m. 33), and even beyond the conclusion of the DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH chain (m. 35). The example highlights instances of the Phrygian tetrachord (half-whole-whole).<sup>(28)</sup> The first two tetrachords (on F, then on C) are straightforward reductions of the melody. The thunderous arrival on a C-major triad, the goal of the whole passage, contains a less obvious statement of the next

**Example 9.** <HWW> Tetrachords in mm. 30–41



(click to enlarge)

**Example 10.** Inexact Augmentation of *J* in mm. 39–41 and its Overlap with the Recapitulatory *J*



(click to enlarge)

tetrachord in the pattern (beginning on G) embedded within a series of descending 3rds. At the same time, the pitches on successive downbeats—G and F—set up an expectation for E<sup>b</sup> that is realized only in m. 41 when the theme returns, as shown by the bracket above the staff. During the prolongation of the C harmony, a Phrygian tetrachord on C is outlined, the second half of which participates in the small-scale DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH on A<sup>b</sup>. Finally, the melody in m. 41 can be heard as initiating a WWH tetrachord beginning on G.<sup>(29)</sup>

[21] In the *forte* DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH statement (mm. 33ff.), F minor sounds like tonic and C major like dominant. Rhetorically, the passage beginning in m. 35 sounds like a retransition. Coinciding with the

small-scale echo in mm. 39–41 is a re-introduction of *J* given in Example 10. When we hear C-E $\flat$ -F, we expect the continuation in the top staff of the example. But the music proceeds as given in the bottom staff: the third pitch of *J* is held for over three beats, and the expected E $\flat$  never arrives. In its place is E $\natural$ , which, although unexpected from the standpoint of the *J*-statement beginning on C, conforms to the statement of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH within whose echo it is embedded. At the same time, the E $\natural$  initiates another statement of *J*.<sup>(30)</sup> Reinforcing this E $\natural$  is the E $\natural$  an octave higher, which (as Example 9 showed) participates in a large-scale stepwise descending 3rd spanning mm. 35–41.

[22] The overlap between

**Example 11.** Augmentation of *J* in mm. 41–43 as



two forms of J here is only one way in which the music disguises the return of the opening material. Tonally, C major was ushered in as a dominant of F minor (m. 35); but what is initially heard as a dominant is actually the tonic: what first sounds like i to V is really—or rather, becomes—iv to I. Brahms exploits this well-known ambiguity of the tonal system to marvelous effect here.<sup>(31)</sup> Rhythmically, the statement of J beginning on E $\flat$  is in augmentation, as shown in Example 11: it is almost as if J has been listening while DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH held center stage. Recall that DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH is augmented from one measure to two measures in mm. 33ff., while J is absent; in mm. 41ff., J is augmented relative to its original statement. (Also, it would have been too abrupt for J to return in its original rhythmic

Reference to op. 119, no. 2

119, no. 3, mm. 1-3

119, no. 3, mm. 41-43

119, no. 2, mm. 100-103 (transposed)

(click to enlarge)

form after the 3  
1/3-beat-long F4 in mm.  
39–40.) But three statements  
of thus-augmented J would  
take too long. Brahms's  
solution is ingenious: only  
two Js are stated, and the  
second J is shortened to  
EAG, omitting the first G. In  
so doing, the music makes an  
explicit reference to op. 119,  
no. 2: this shortened form of  
J in op. 119, no. 3 traces a  
transposed retrograde of the  
first four pitches of the  
six-pitch motto of op. 119,  
no. 2, as shown in Example  
11. The last line of the  
example transposes the  
melody of the codetta, which  
chains together three  
statements of the abbreviated  
motto.<sup>(32)</sup> Since op. 119 no. 2  
ends with the abbreviated  
motto, the motivic  
relationship between the two  
pieces can be brought out  
diachronically if the two  
pieces are played in  
sequence.<sup>(33)</sup> J then returns in  
its original form in m. 45.<sup>(34)</sup>

[23] And speaking of retrogrades, the chromatic pitch classes in section A<sub>2</sub> occur in retrograde order relative to section A<sub>1</sub> plus B. (See again [Example 6](#).) First comes B $\flat$  in m. 46, then C $\sharp$  in m. 47, both acting to tonicize D minor, paralleling the use of the same scale degrees to tonicize G major in mm. 6–7. The remainder are tied to an altered recapitulation of mm. 7–8. <sup>(35)</sup>

[24] Section A<sub>2</sub> is dominated by a lengthy dominant prolongation (mm. 49–65) that reworks the music of mm. 7ff. As shown in Example 12, m. 49 is a transposition of m. 7 down a perfect 5th, an instance of sonata principle; coincident with this transposition is a reversal of strong and weak hypermetric beats that results from the absolute hypermetric regularity of mm. 25–48. <sup>(36)</sup> Relative to the transposition of m. 7 in m. 49, the music of m. 50 is a whole step too low relative to m. 8; this transposition up a minor 3rd (or down a major 6th) produces pcs A $\flat$  and F $\sharp$  that fulfill the retrogression just mentioned, and necessitates the repetition of

**Example 12.** Mm. 7–8 and mm. 49–55

The image displays musical notation for three measures. Measure 7 (top left) and measure 8 (top right) are shown in a 6/8 time signature. Below them, measures 49 through 55 are shown, with measure 49 being a transposition of measure 7 down a perfect 5th. Brackets under measures 49-50 and 51-52 are labeled 'repetition' and '2nd' respectively, indicating the structure of the dominant prolongation.

(click to enlarge)

this material. In m. 50, the lines of m. 8 are re-arranged: the melody line is now on top, and the left-hand part carries both of the chromatic lines from m. 8.<sup>(37)</sup> The new top line in the piano departs from the reigning transposition up by minor 3rd, stating E in place of E $\flat$  (transposition up a *diatonic* 3rd). Measure 53, constituting the second pattern of a sequence, is the “correct” transposition of m. 8, but again, one voice is inflected: the melodic sequence begun in m. 52 implies a D at the end of m. 53, but D is inflected to D $\sharp$ , producing a curious  $\sharp 2$ -to- $\flat 4$  diminished-3rd across the barline.<sup>(38)</sup> The expected final chromatic pitch class, D $\sharp$ /E $\flat$ , is thus withheld until the “correct” transposition of m. 8.

Strikingly, the liquidation here is the opposite of the process in mm. 4–9. In mm. 49–55, a two-measure unit is repeated, then its second measure becomes the pattern

for a sequence; in mm. 4–9, a one-measure pattern is lengthened into a two-measure pattern. There is yet another parallel between the two sections having to do with the development of the two figures originally found in mm. 6 and 7: in section A<sub>1</sub>, the figure from m. 7 is repeated (in mm. 9–11), producing a hypermetric reinterpretation (in m. 9); in section A<sub>2</sub>, the figure from m. 50—which in turn derives from m. 6 via m. 8—is repeated (in mm. 52–54), producing a hypermetric reinterpretation (in m. 52).

[25] After the highly chromatic journey of the B section, pitch class A presents less of a threat than it did in section A<sub>1</sub>. The only C<sup>#</sup>s in section A<sub>2</sub> (in mm. 47–48 and 54) occur in contexts that reinforce—or at least do not undermine—C major. Though it is clear now that the key of C is primary, pitch class A continues to have a real presence: in mm. 59–61, a melodic A-E occurs twice, followed by C-G in mm. 61–62.<sup>(39)</sup> There are prominent A's in mm. 63 and 64 as well, but they no longer threaten C major since the “problem” has now worked itself out. In mm. 66–68, thrice-J occurs in its rhythmically augmented form (from m. 41) but without its last note so that it fits within the meter.<sup>(40)</sup> By this point, pitch class A has been so thoroughly integrated that we nearly accept the chord CEGA as tonic.<sup>(41)</sup>

[26] Example 13 summarizes the harmonic trajectory of the piece. The boldface pitch classes in part a. constitute a circle of ascending perfect 5ths; here the letter names stand for triads. Conceptually, we can think of this circle of 5ths first being embellished by the chords at the half hours that fill in each 5th with two

**Example 13.** All DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTHs in the  
Piece



downbeat to downbeat. The next two, really one embedded within another, take 2 1/2 and 4 measures. After this lengthening of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH, it is suddenly contracted: three statements in the span of only three measures. The normative two-measure length of DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH returns at the point at which J disappears, in m. 33.

[28] My own initial impression of the Intermezzo was of blandness: the absolute diatonicism—in C major, no less!—of the opening and the seemingly meandering harmonic progression discouraged me from continuing beyond the first two lines or so. It was only after taking a closer look that I began to marvel at what Brahms has done here: it no longer seemed bland at the beginning, but subtle, with the diatonicism establishing the tonal problem and throwing each chromatic pitch class into especial relief. The densely chromatic B section, with its lengthy DOWN-THIRD-UP-FIFTH chain and regular hypermeter, complements the sparsely chromatic and hypermetrically irregular A<sub>1</sub> section. The strict ordering of the five chromatic pitch classes in the first half of the piece and the reversal of this ordering in the second half is remarkable, and warrants further investigation in the rest of Brahms's oeuvre.