

Schubert, Brahms & Stravinsky – A Neglected Piano Trio?

The piano plays a quantitatively small part in Stravinsky's works, but was nevertheless important to him. Artur Schnabel described in his memoirs how Stravinsky had been reluctant to perform his own piano works, feeling he was not competent enough – then changing his mind and playing them too frequently for his own good. He was never a practising concert pianist as such, unlike his contemporaries Rachmaninov, Bartok and Shostakovich. Stravinsky had this in common with both Brahms and Schubert, who both also played the piano competently, but fell short of joining the virtuoso composers of their times. Perhaps it is this “semi-pianism”, common to the three composers, that gave rise to a distinct similarity in their piano styles, a similarity not often noticed in the historiography of the piano, overshadowed by the illustrious lineage of Beethoven, Czerny, Chopin and Liszt.

Every great composer has their own style of writing for the piano, inseparable from the style of their music. No one would confuse a piano work by Chopin with one by Schubert – the piano writing alone would be unmistakable, even before considering other aspects. If one considers that Chopin's Don Giovanni Variations, his Krakowiak and his Fantasy on Polish Airs were all written around the same time as Schubert's last three Sonatas, the difference is clear. Schubert is much less variable in the form of his arpeggios – Chopin's figurations are infinitely more imaginative and pianistic, whereas Schubert's seem often to be more orchestrally conceived. Paradoxically, Schubert the song writer seems less interested in melody in his piano music, at least in his sonatas: more common are chordal progressions, or melodies that are formed of (thinly disguised) broken chords. An extreme example of this is the unfinished Sonata in C D 840, which barely has a genuine melody in the whole first movement. More pianistic composers, Mozart as much as Chopin, would be likely to embellish such angular phrases, creating more lyrical lines and figurations. This is as much a question of musical as of pianistic style, but it does seem peculiar to Schubert's piano writing.

Schubert's more virtuosic works are often very physical – the music seems to be composed *in abstractum* and then made to fit the instrument, leaving the pianist to cope with the demands. This is not to say that Schubert didn't write pianistically, in fact his mastery of pianistic texture and sound is always evident. But the difficulties the pianist faces in Schubert seem to arise from the demands of the music, whereas in Chopin they seem to be problems specifically invented for the pianist. At his most physical, such as in the Wanderer Fantasy, Schubert uses thick wide chords, simple but fast arpeggios, leaps, scales – it is not the complexity of the texture that poses the problem for the pianist, merely the pure challenge of attending to all these things. One could describe this as being conservative, using an essentially classical piano technique in the mould of early to middle period Beethoven, but that would be an injustice to the way in which Schubert adapts this technique to such radically original music as the Wanderer Fantasy, the Sonatas in A Minor, D 845 and G, D 894 and the final F Minor Impromptu.

A similar situation faces the pianist in many works by Brahms, where the same curious blend of pianistic mastery and pianistic indifference is frequently found. One need only think of certain passages from the 2nd Piano Concerto or the Ballades Op. 10 to find passages that seem to be written in spite of the pianist rather than for him/her. There is a world of difference between difficult passages in Liszt and difficult passages in Brahms – as a comparison between the Paganini Variations of both composers can show. Fast and loud legato sixths in the left hand just seem too cruel for Liszt, whose challenges are no less formidable, but perhaps more considerate. It almost seems as if Brahms, like Schubert before him, decided on a technical element, such as sixths, or leaps, and took to it to an extreme. Chopin, even in his Etudes, rarely allowed himself such (Teutonic?) focus. The remarkable achievement of Brahms, and of Schubert, is to make such writing sound and feel so good at the piano. For all their “unpianistic” style, the balance of the chords, the voice-leading, the command of dynamics and timbre are utterly convincing. One need only explore the piano works of Dvorak to find music that reveals much less interest in and instinct for the possibilities of the instrument.

Another aspect of Brahms’ piano writing that can also be found in Schubert is a certain tendency to sparse, almost spartanic textures. The slow movement of Schubert’s Sonata D 959 is mostly so sparse as to be almost monastic, not dissimilar in this sense to some of Brahms’ works, notably the late piano pieces or chamber works. The first two Intermezzi from Op. 119, the second from Op. 117 or even the last of the Ballades Op. 10 show that Brahms was interested in other things beside the rich and thick textures he so excelled at. Some composers have been criticised for composing their orchestral music at the piano and then orchestrating it, rather than composing straight onto an orchestral score. In Brahms’ case, it is as if he were sometimes composing his piano music on an orchestral score, and then reducing it to the piano.

In this he is similar to Stravinsky, who also composed in many different textures and had a fondness for technical challenges of an athletic nature. The Wanderer Fantasy may have inspired the Paganini Variations, but the “Trois Mouvements de Petrouchka” owe much to both in terms of pianism and spirit. There are many passages in Petrushka that could almost have been lifted from Brahms:

Ex 1-4

The point here is the use of fairly simple, basic elements to express virtuosity through sheer momentum. A comparison of the piano writing in Petrushka with that in any works by Rachmaninov can illustrate this in a similar way to a comparison of the Paganini Variations by Brahms and by Liszt. Petrushka is something of a special case in Stravinsky’s piano works – partly due to the fact that it is an orchestral transcription, partly due to its overt concentration on virtuoso techniques. It would be interesting to compare in detail Stravinsky’s method of transcription with Brahms’ transcription techniques in works such as the Hungarian Dances or the Waltzes Op. 39 for solo piano, but many of these techniques seem to filter into original piano works by both composers, such as these examples show:

Ex 8 & 9

Of course, much of Stravinsky's piano writing is quite different from that of Brahms, often being thinner and more percussive, but there are many passages and figurations in his piano works that are reminiscent of Brahms, such as:

Ex 5-6

Many of these features can to some degree be found in Prokofiev, who also had a fondness for doubling thirds and generally creating dense expansive textures.

Ex 7

Even Rachmaninov and Medtner share much with Brahms in terms of the sound, and often textures, that they employ in their piano works. Could it be that Tchaikovsky's unloved Teutonic nemesis had as much influence of 20th century Russian piano writing as Chopin and Liszt?

The similarity between Brahms and Stravinsky extends beyond elements of their piano writing. Both were highly deliberate composers crafting a large, very comprehensive body of work to a consistently high standard. Both were keen to continue existing traditions rather than to break with them, even when others around them decided to open entirely new avenues, and both spent most of their long, productive lives developing ideas and techniques that were conservative in comparison with much of what surrounded them. There is a danger in identifying Stravinsky purely with his early years of scandal, and Brahms only with his antagonism to certain dominant trends of 19th century modernism: apart from a few years around the first world war Stravinsky was far from avant-garde as dodecaphonics, quarter tones and later serialism became established, whereas Brahms, as Schönberg pointed out, was far more innovative than he is often portrayed.

Pianists often comment about the "lack of pianism" in Brahms or Schubert, and also in Stravinsky, on the rare occasions that his piano music is played. There is a tacit agreement that pianism is the style of piano writing developed by Chopin and Liszt (although the two composers were of course quite distinct themselves) and continued by the great piano composers of the 20th century. This idea can be understood to imply that the distinction is merely between pianistic and unpianistic writing; a different view would be that pianism is to a large extent a reflection of musical priorities, and that musical priorities, tonal ideas and methods of working therefore affect the way a composer writes for the piano. Examining the usage of pianistic idioms and techniques in the works of early 19th century to 20th century composers gives a fascinating insight not only into their pianistic imaginations, but also reveals much about their sources and inspirations, creating connections between composers even when these connections do not match generally accepted ideas. It also demonstrates that the development of piano technique followed several strands, all

mutually cross-fertilizing, and that the relative influences of these strands were sometimes not as we might expect.

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Examples:

Ex 1: Brahms, Paganini Studies – Stravinsky, Petrushka



Ex 2: Brahms, Hungarian Dance No 5 – Stravinsky, Petrushka



Ex 3: Brahms, Concerto No 1 – Stravinsky, Petrushka

459

I

cresc.

Detailed description: This system shows the first ending of a piano piece. The right hand has a melodic line with a crescendo marking. The left hand has a bass line with a similar dynamic. A bracket labeled 'I' spans the first ending. The page number '459' is at the bottom left.

gliss.

8 3 3 2 1 8 2 3 4 1 2 3 8

2 2 2

Detailed description: This system continues the piano part. The right hand features a glissando marking and several fingering numbers (8, 3, 2, 1, 8, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 8). The left hand has a glissando marking and three double-measure rests labeled '2'. The system concludes with a double-measure rest labeled '2'.

Ex 4: Brahms, Hungarian Dance No 6 – Stravinsky, Petrushka

sostenuto

8

8 bassa

Detailed description: This system shows a piano part with a 'sostenuto' marking. The right hand has a melodic line with a 'sostenuto' marking. The left hand has a bass line with a '8 bassa' marking. The system concludes with a double-measure rest labeled '8'.

Ex 5: Brahms, Concerto No 1 – Stravinsky, Capriccio

Ex 5: Brahms, Concerto No 1 – Stravinsky, Capriccio. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows the right hand (treble clef) with a complex, chromatic melody and the left hand (bass clef) with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system continues the piece, featuring a change in the left hand's accompaniment and a final melodic phrase in the right hand. Fingerings and articulation marks are clearly indicated throughout.

Ex 6: Stravinsky, Serenade in A & Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments

Ex 6: Stravinsky, Serenade in A & Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows a piano (*p*) dynamic with a complex, chromatic melody in the right hand and a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand. The second system continues the piece, featuring a change in the left hand's accompaniment and a final melodic phrase in the right hand. Fingerings and articulation marks are clearly indicated throughout.

Ex 7: Prokofiev, Sonata 4

Andante assai

mf *serioso*

The musical score for Prokofiev's Sonata 4, Ex 7, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece in 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of 'Andante assai' and a dynamic of 'mf' and 'serioso'. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand, while the right hand plays a melodic line. The second system continues the piece, showing more complex rhythmic patterns and dynamics in both hands.

Ex 8 Brahms, Rhapsody Op 119, 4

The musical score for Brahms' Rhapsody Op 119, 4, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece in 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of 'Andante assai' and a dynamic of 'mf' and 'serioso'. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand, while the right hand plays a melodic line. The second system continues the piece, showing more complex rhythmic patterns and dynamics in both hands.

Ex 9: Stravinsky, Piano Rag Music

M. M. ♩ = 144.

8^{va} alta

très fort

m. g.

The musical score for Stravinsky's Piano Rag Music is presented in two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece in 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of 'M. M. ♩ = 144.' and a dynamic of 'très fort'. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand, while the right hand plays a melodic line. The second system continues the piece, showing more complex rhythmic patterns and dynamics in both hands.