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บทความวิชาการ (Academic Article)

Accompaniment Guide: Brahms' Scherzo from FAE Sonata

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Abstract

Due to the similar resemblance of their ranges, Johannes Brahms' *Scherzo* from the *FAE Sonata* can be performed on both violin and viola. While the differences between the sounds of two string instruments may be hardly noticeable to the untrained ears, piano accompanists must remain adaptable to changes in timbre and other technical aspects when the viola assumes the solo role. This article demonstrates that the shift in instrumentation results in a significantly altered creative outcome, especially when appropriately supported by insightful perspectives on a comprehensive rendition of the piano collaborator.

According to music scholars, the viola produces a mellower timbre compared to the violin. Furthermore, the factors such as bow weight, fingerboard spacing, and fingering choices clearly influence how the accompanists would interpret the piece. The historical reviews, of *Scherzo* from the *FAE Sonata*, highlight criticisms of Brahms' writing. The critic has noted that Brahms often placed excessive technical demand on the violin soloist and the instrument itself leading to abrasive effect. The use of viola as an alternative instrument solves this issue due to its resistance to heavy bowing and extreme dynamic contrasts. Moreover, the viola's rich middle and lower registers enhance the darker tonality of the *Scherzo* in C minor, offering a more balanced interpretation. The methodology developed from this notion includes exploration of analyses found in key components such as structure, tonality, harmonic activity,

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motific development, time, and meter among others. The following paragraphs are listed outcomes of such finding.

Firstly, the viola line, positioned as an inner voice within the surrounded chordal accompaniment, is being compared to a female *Alto* voice. The pianist must emphasize this inner line by highlighting the chord tones that are closest to the *Alto* range making the passage more resonant and attractive. The violin alternative, when play the same opening, is to emphasize the top voice that is closer to the *Soprano* range instead.

Secondly, the issue of fingering can significantly influence how the pianists navigate and accommodates the passages filled with successive intervallic leaps. Since the distances between pitches are greater on the viola due to its longer fingerboard compared to the violin counterpart, players may take more time when shifting positions. In such cases, the pianist must apply acute listening skills to maintain alignment with the soloist, mostly in terms of timing that grants the soloist a form of freedom to express their desired musicality without the restraint of gritty rhythmic units.

Thirdly, specific piano techniques play some crucial roles in shaping the piece's transitions and contrasting melodic models. Absorbed *staccato* helps smoothen the transitions to avoid any abrupt formal changes that would result in fragmentation of the sections. Applying subtle touches allows for refined control, preventing delicate lyrical passages—rich with harmonic subtleties—from progressing too quickly. These piano techniques encourage prudent pacing that preserves every moment of tranquility, ultimately enhancing the contrast and dramatic impact of the louder sections.

The final performance guideline focuses on timbral effects that align with the work's structure—especially when the viola assumes the role of solo instrument. Performers are advised to refrain from employing exaggerated *rubato* or abrupt dynamic shift or *subito* in the retransition or immediately before the main theme's return in the recapitulation. In this position, the retransition shall not serve as a formal cue but rather an effectuation of timbral changes, thereby enriches the audience's auditory experience. Subsequently, in the closing five bars of the movement, the rhythmic continuity of tied notes is deliberately interrupted. The severed connection of the chord tones is an adaptation calibrated to the technical

requirements of the viola optimizing the instrument's resonance and coloristic potential at the conclusion.

Overall, the primary objective of this article is to emphasize that a well-informed interpretation must be grounded in a thorough understanding of historical and formal contexts—most importantly, a strong grasp of music theory and performance practice. The essential steps for achieving a successful performance, as outlined in this research, encourage musicians and readers to explore alternative interpretations of this work and others of a similar nature. These considerations are made on the notion that performers must remain mindful of their practical constraints that are inherent in unconventional instrumentation, but also explore their unbounded creative possibilities simultaneously. Such an analeptic and reflective approach contributes to development of pedagogical frameworks, offering a flexible process for learning and performing that can be readily applied to comparable works, while fostering critical thinking and listening skills essential for collaborative musicians.

Keywords: FAE Sonata / Johannes Brahms / Chamber Music / String Sonata / Viola Sonata

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Timbral differences of violin and viola evoke the issues of the ability for the audience to distinguish between two instruments. A research paper title, "Is it Violin or Viola? Classifying the Instruments' Music Pieces using Descriptive Statistics"—features the discussion of how the two string instruments are not easily distinguishable, especially to the untrained ears, the general audience. Hence, the contrasting components in terms of the sound body and production process of each instrument are not typically recognized as immediate topic of interest due to "insufficient annotated violin and viola dataset."[1] The sole cause of inaccuracy, when compared, significantly reflective of the lack of success in retrieving wide variety of

[1] Chong Hong Tan and others, "Is It Violin or Viola? Classifying the Instruments' Music Pieces Using Descriptive Statistics," *ACM Transactions on Multimedia Computing, Communications, and Applications* 19, 2s (2023): 2, https://doi.org/10.1145/3563218.

repertoires for both string types ranging from the Baroque to the Modern period – rendering insufficient data for comprehensive study.[2]

The integral role of piano accompaniment is among some of the focuses in this discussion. The comparison of a piece that can be played both ways—interchangeably between the two string instruments: violin and viola, given that either instrument has the capability of fulfilling the range and aesthetic of the piece. The criterial concerns fall on physicality, technicality, characteristic, and timbre in relation to the reaction of the accompanying entity rendering suggestions to advanced technical applications in the form of a performance guide. This guide helps establish how accompanist achieves fluidity and flexibility in chamber music playing—drawing on a treasured classical music movement from the Romantic period by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), known for his reputation for the mastery of the *Scherzo* as in musical form.[3]

The comical but rather sarcastically tense movement of *Scherzo for the Violin* WoO 2 (1853) by Brahms was composed as part of a special occasion, which Robert Schumann (1810-1856) proposed to his intimate friend group in the fashion called *pasticcio* or joint composition meaning that the movements are allocated to different musician friends to complete. *FAE Sonata*, which is the product of the group's *pasticcio,* was a heartfelt dedication to the famous violinist and a good friend, Josheph Joachim (1831-1907).[4] Albert H. Dietrich (1829-1908) completed the first movement (*Allegro* in A minor) while Schumann composed the *Intermezzo* in F major and *Finale* in A minor (ending in A major). The third movement of the sonata or *Scherzo* in C minor (ending in C major), partly based on the motif of Dietrich's first movement, was allocated to Brahms.[5]

The initials present in the title, F-A-E, become the encrypted motif in the sonata. The eccentric belief of Joachim, "*Frei aber einsam*" or "free but lonely," has become the romantic phrase that all three composers abided as part of their intimate gesture toward the friend.

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[2] Chong Hong Tan and others, 2.

[3] Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work*, 3rd ed. (New York: Da Capo, 1982), 224.

[4] Joel Lester, *Brahms's Violin Sonatas: Style, Structure, Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 9.

[5] Walter Niemann, *Brahms*, trans. Catherine A. Phillips (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1969), 42.

Brahms, who is famously known for his masterful art of allusion,[6] elevates the complexity of the movement by employing the theme from elsewhere, for example, the motif of his own composition from the first movement of the *String Quartet* in A minor, op. 51, no. 2.[7]

Even though the movement was composed roughly forty-five years prior to Brahms' death in 1897, Joachim only released the third movement, or the *Scherzo* afore others to be published in 1935.[8] Joachim held complete ownership over the manuscript and kept the piece as a personal property not knowing that the piece would yield much interest in the field of Romantic String *Sonati*.[9] Brahms' *Scherzo for the Violin* WoO 2 (1853) is frequently performed with either instrument from string family: violin or viola.

Studying the differences between viola and violin as solo instruments in romantic repertoire allows the musicians to unveil and understand the timbral contrasts proved to be a fascinating phenomenon, especially the versatility of the concerned category. The rich context of this violin sonata's movement by Brahms is a study model for the effectiveness of interaction between the string soloists and their accompanists. The interpretation of the accompaniment counterpart remains largely a focal appeal for the professional piano players to continue determining and experimenting further.

Analysis

An issue of instrumentation in a violin sonata movement by Brahms is highlighted in a volume of *American Record Guide*, America's oldest classical music review magazine founded in 1935. In his review of a performance at Champs Hill, January 2016, music critic and writer, Joseph Magil comments on this matter:

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[6] Paul Berry, *Brahms Among Friends: Listening, Performance, and the Rhetoric of Allusion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19-20.

[7] Peter F. Ostwald, "Johannes Brahms, Solitary Altruist," in *Brahms and His Word,* ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 29.

[8] Karl Geiringer, 224.

[9] Walter Niemann, 41-42.

> The *Scherzo* from the *FAE Sonata* is included, and this is the best recording of it that I've heard because of Jeremy Young. I usually find the piece overblown, but Young doesn't blast through it like most pianists. He carefully reins in his part and puts the piano through its paces like a master horseman on highly disciplined mount in a dressage arena. Young's piano is very clearly recorded and balanced perfectly with Sadie Fields's violin. Fields is a fine violinist who could use a better instrument. She gets a good range of colors from her violin and can produce a very full tone appropriate to Brahms, but her violin often shows the strain of putting out so much sound and produces a gritty sound.[10]

At first glance, violin and viola can be a close resemblance of the other instrument. Humans' perception can be challenged when asked to distinguish the timbres of the two instruments. According to "Is it Violin or Viola," the article in music education, the viola has a "mellow" sound while a violin has a "sharper" sound, but these descriptions are not compelling nor applicable to situations.[11]

From this performance review, Magil points out that the violin is absorbing too much tension causing audible strain during the performance. A substituting viola, in this case, would easily solve the mechanical flaws perceived in the case of the violin. The radical consonance of the violin in the higher register, even with the theoretical assumption above, may not be exempted either because of the broad progression of this sonata movement. Each instrument is merely identical because of the physical attribute of three overlapping strings, whereas the viola has a C3 string, a lower range that is not achievable on a violin. The authors, then, proposes that the only approach to distinguish their sounds must be done statistically by counting the pitches that are not achievable on each instrument's range.[12] This article, however, focuses on timbral and technical differences because the pitches are entirely within the ranges for the movement.

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[10] Joseph Magil, "Brahms: Violin Sonatas; Scherzo," *American Record Guide* 79, 1 (2016): 76.

[11] Chong Hong Tan and others, 2.

[12] Chong Hong Tan and others, 2-3.

The first consideration in conjunction to the choice of solo instrument for the *Scherzo* particularly concerns the tone or 'timbre' of the viola, which yields more suitable characteristic than its treble counterpart. According to the same study aiming to distinguish between the sound of the violin and viola, C. H. Tan and others specify that the vibrations from the strings of these instruments are transmitted to the top plate and bottom plate through the bridge, when bowed. This process creates reverberate within the hollow body of the instruments producing desirable sounds. The typical description of viola's sound as "mellow" or "deep" is because "it generally has a slower sound than the violin due to its thicker strings. As the viola is larger instrument with thicker strings and larger sound box, it requires a heavier bow with a firmer technique to produce rich sounds."[13] The viola, then, is a better choice for the movement which solely bases on the physical strength of the instrument, the type of tone that it can produced, and the physics behinds time, force, and matter, which all contribute to the sound production of the viola.

The *Scherzo* starts with emphasizing a darker opening in part of the string, repeated notes in the lower register – within the octave below the middle C while the piano accompaniment awaits its joining turn after the anacrusis and first two beats of the movement. The chordal gestures on the piano, distinguishable by its top note melody in the first phrase in the *Scherzo*, also conveniently described as successive microscopic rises toward the final phrasal summit in mm. 9 (Example 1) becomes the crucial point of interpretation on the piano in terms of voicing or supporting touches that suits the characteristic of the composition and the selected solo string. The forcing tension of the louder dynamics on the string of the violin in the range that is lower than the middle C, precisely G3 with occasional emphases, rendering a rhetorical question of whether this piece is more suitable for the viola or, in the least, appropriate both ways.

Metaphorically, there are drastic differences in technicality of playing the piano as opposed to the harpsichord namely the tempo adjustment and fingering in scales, the notions which scholars and players had uncoded as part of keyboard performance study, the violin and viola deserve the same treatment regarding careful observations of their different applications. The mechanism of the two string instruments is undeniably similar with three

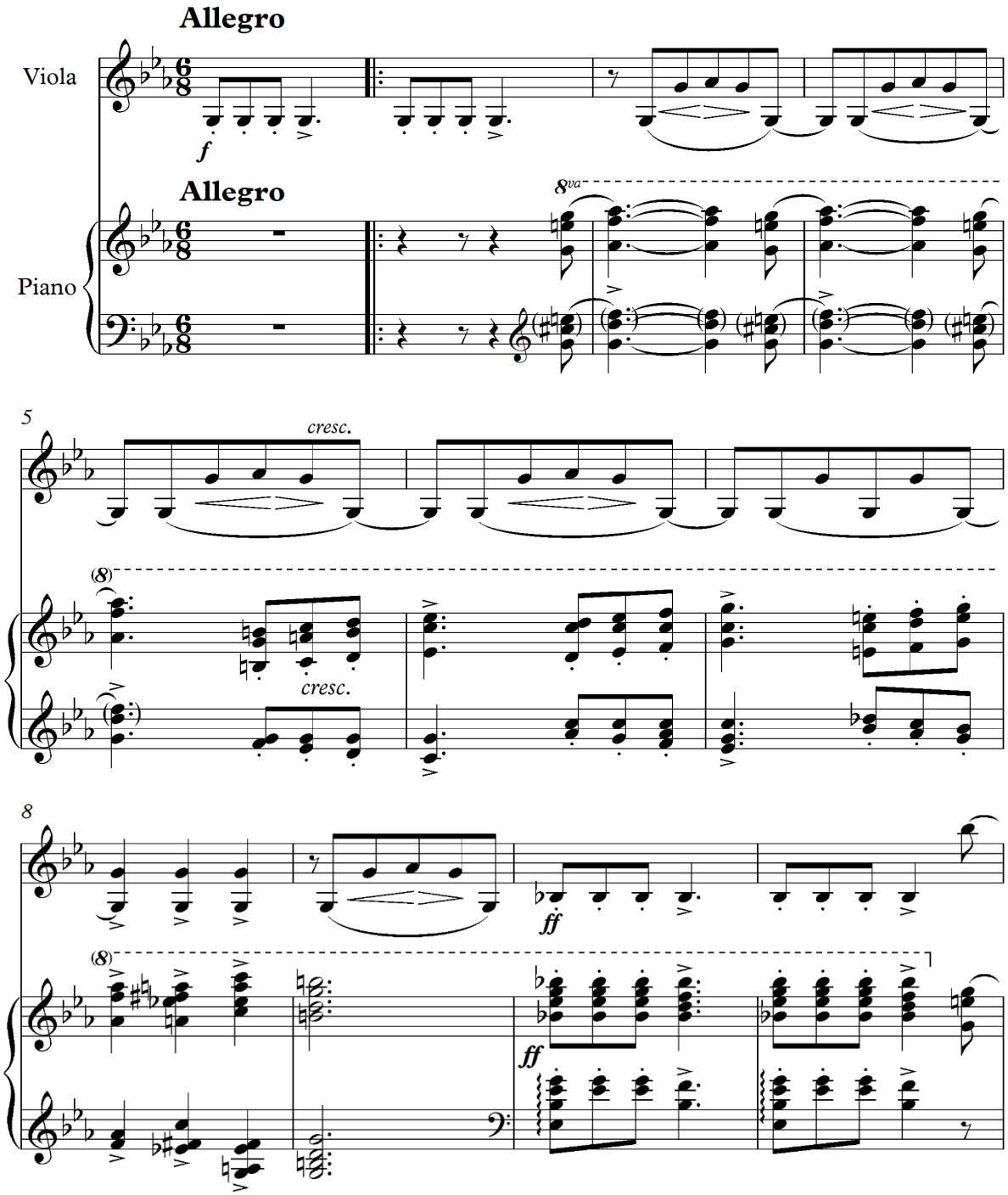
[13] Chong Hong Tan and others, 6.

overlapping strings, some accompanist may argue that there is little or no difference in the ways pianist interacts with the violin or viola, especially if plays the same pieces of music. The effectiveness of the opening of Brahms' *Scherzo*, in terms of sonic projection, lies in the collaborator's ability to present ideas that enable the string performers to harness each instrument's harmonic essence. Such collaboration allows harmonic contents of both strings to shine through as early as in the thematic statement.

The expression in the viola simply takes more time than the violin, heavier, but more expressive and warmer due to the thickness of the strings. In mm. 1-11, the accompanist must assert the *Soprano* line or the top note melody as the melodic gesture that is shifted harmonically in case of the violin. In turn, the pianist must instinctively emphasize the harmonic inner connection of the tones in the opening to be a reminiscence of a female *Alto* singer, therefore, bringing more attention to the inner voices when the piece is played by the viola counterpart. In Example 1, the inner voices are indicated in the parentheses in the left hand of the piano accompaniment starting in the treble clef from mm. 2-5. The weight must be applied to the indicated notes in order to help accentuate the viola melody by highlighting the *Alto* line of the piano creating a desirable balance specifically tailored for the viola adaptation of the piece.

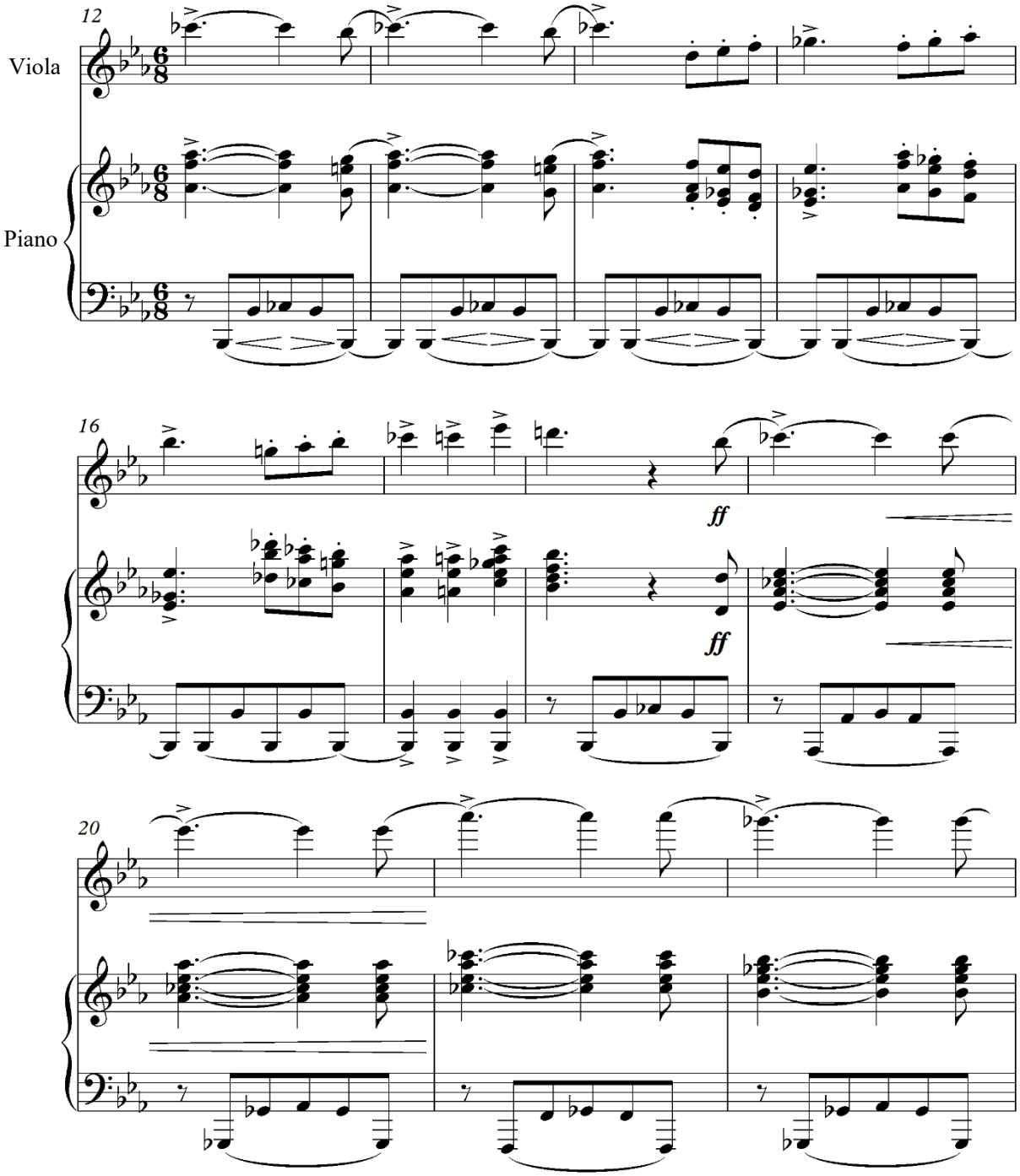
When the piano's bass line assumes a more dominant role in the piece, the heaviness of the double root foundation—expressed through harmonic or melodic octaves is both effective and desirable. In Example 2, mm. 12–18, this is evident in the static B♭ melodic octaves, which convey a sense of constancy and dominance. The line should be played with a firm, grounded touch to emphasize their structural importance. A similar effect occurs in mm. 19-22 in a form of meandering bassline: A♭-G♭-F-G♭. The same approach can be consistently applied to similar gestures throughout the sonata.

Example 1 The Opening of the *Scherzo* Movement with Emphases on the *Alto* Voice[14]



[14] Johannes Brahms, "Scherzo," in *Sonaten für Klavier und Violine*, ed. Hans Otto Hieke (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1995), 94.

Example 2 Emphases on Melodic Octaves and Meandering Notes of the Piano Bassline[15]

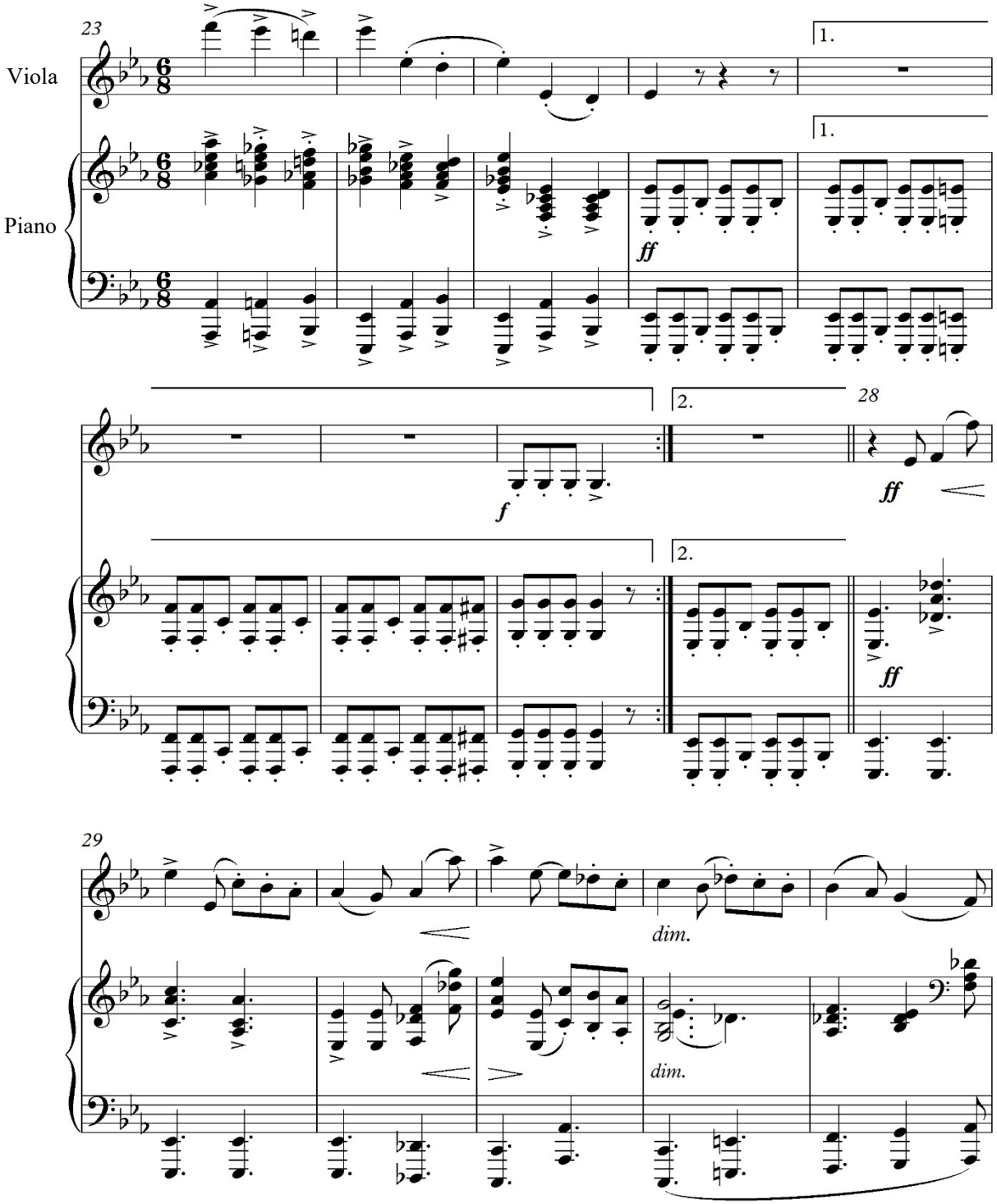


[15] Johannes Brahms, 94-95.

The issue of fingering on the violin and viola affects how the accompanists organize their timings. The second established theme, starting from mm. 28-69, supports the proposed perspective. Specifically, the intervals larger than the fourth such as those of major sixth, perfect fifth, and octave present in Example 3, embedded also in the chordal accompaniment of the piano, require more preparation time when played considering the leaping gesture of the passage. In other words, not only that the piano part should remain in static steady beat but pulled back without any rushing tendencies. The pianists are expected to be sensitive to the shifts in intervals or leaping distances—sonically and physically while acknowledging the differences between the passing tones and the major leaps within the woven melody and harmony in both instrumental parts. The accompaniment must not be displaying metronomic stylistic but adjustable to the nature of the soloist's choice of *tempo* fluctuations and *rubati*. All the components come together to create a deep and supportive framework for the string players to express themselves freely without unnecessary interruption from the piano accompaniment.

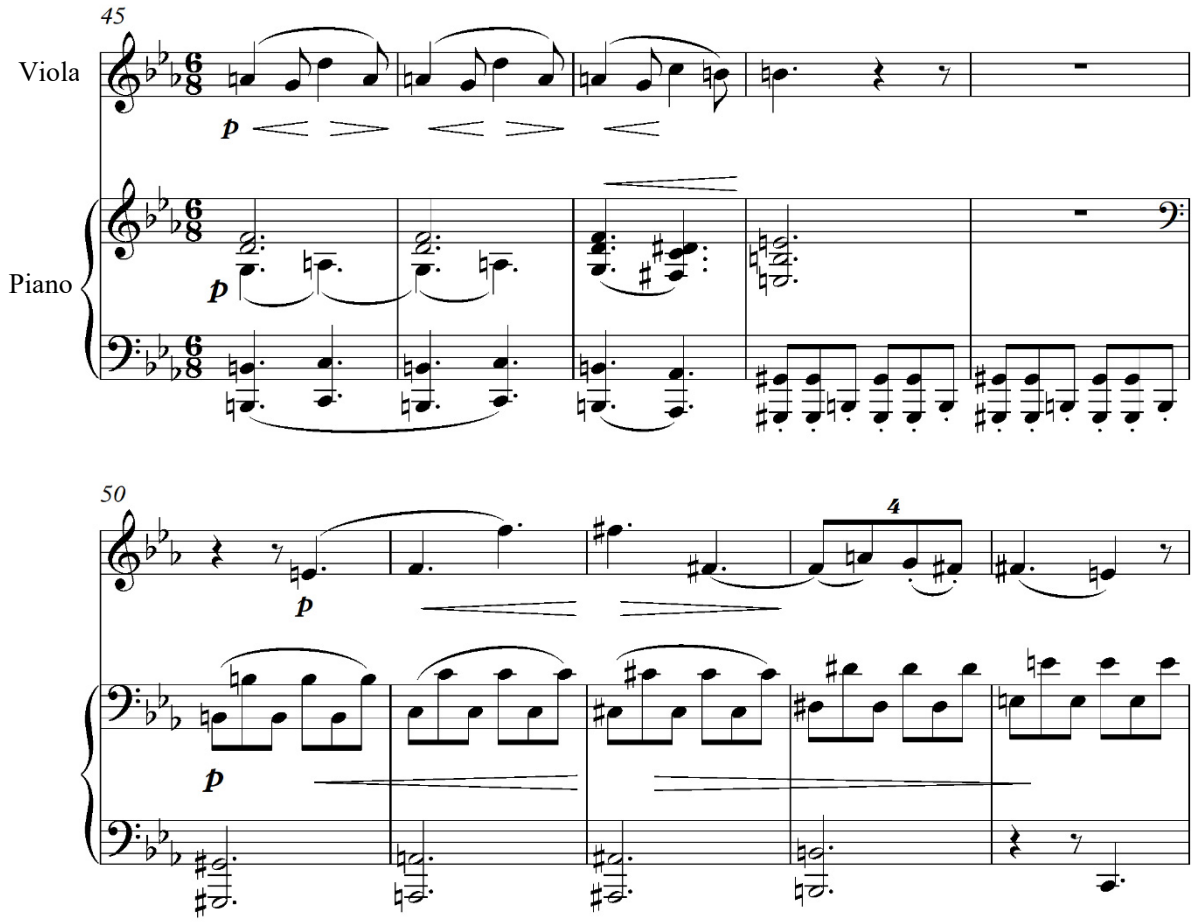
As the first section draws to a close, the repeat sign marks a clear transitional gesture, leading into the second section, which presents a variety of challenges and alternative interpretations in the accompanying part. In mm. 26, where the string part ends on a cadence prior, as the piano is the only instrument sounded, the playing can become strictly metronomic as a result. No sharp staccatos are required here since the character of the passage shall not be jittery but deep, full, and driven forward. The same principle applies to the piano transition in mm. 48-49. The piece soon leads to a striking shift of a soft lyrical part starting in mm. 50 (Example 4). The *legato* indication of the *tremolo*-like passage in the accompaniment must be followed meticulously by avoiding any detached or overly articulated tones that would result in disruptions of the harmony and failure to support the horizontal melodic progression in the string part. Melodic harmonies must be observed and blended out judiciously until this transitional section reaches its end by slowing down gradually in mm. 67–*un poco rit*.

Example 3 Reflections of Large Intervallic Shifts on Both Instruments[16]



[16] Johannes Brahms, 95.

Example 4 A Small Detached Piano Transition Before the Arrival of the Lyrical Passage Characterized by *Tremolo*-Like Gestures in the Right Hand[17]

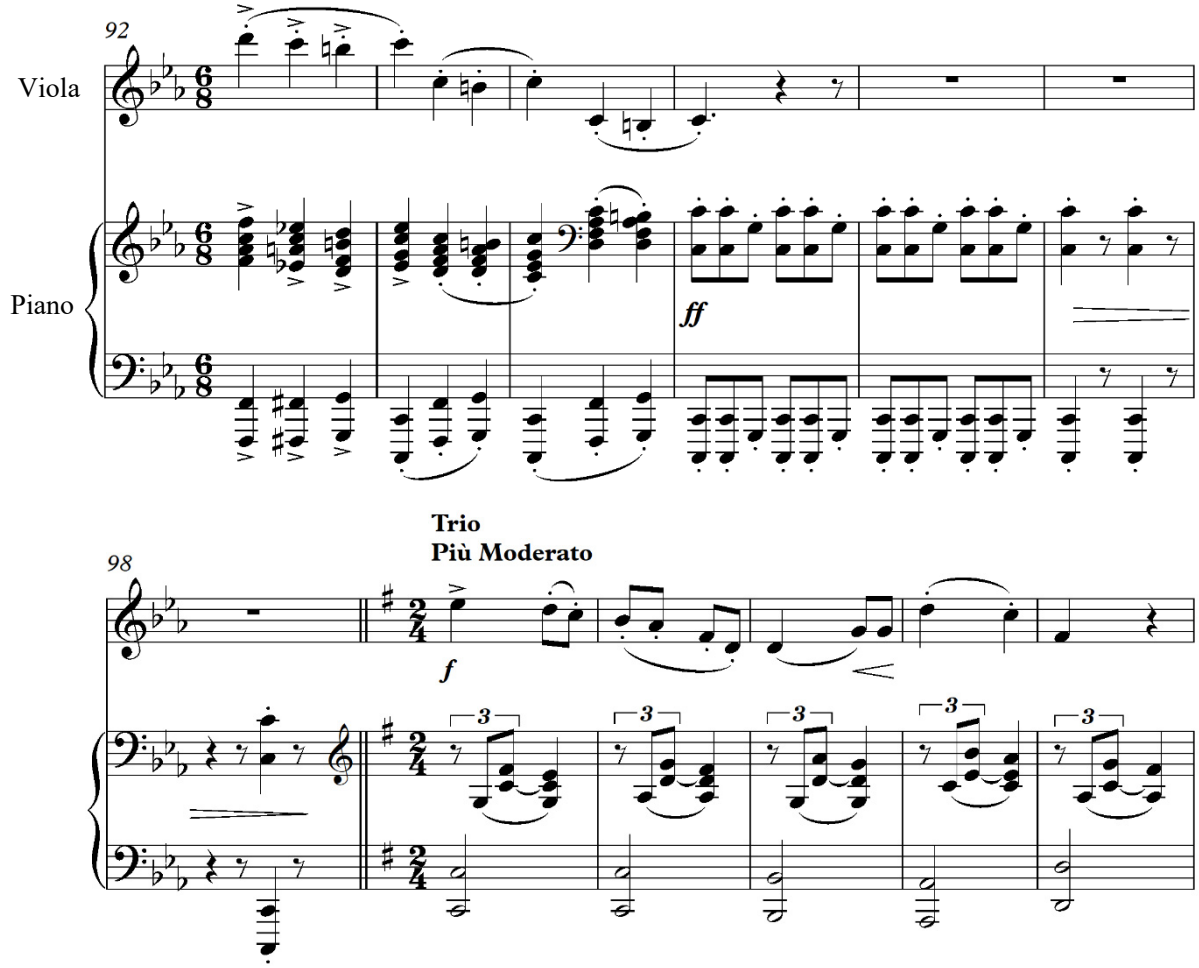


After the decisive slowing down of the *tempo* preceding the subsequent section, the transition is marked *a tempo*, appropriate for a driven and enthusiastic buildup of a new theme. Although the whole section leads up to the Trio—*Più Moderato*—the performers must strictly adhere to the rigid steady pace asserting dominance with little or no *rubato*, avoiding uncontrolled expression that would not contribute to the effect of elevation in terms of key change from the darker tone of C minor to brightness and warmness of G major in mm. 99. Example 5 shows the gradual modulation of a darker tonality to a brighter one with several

[17] Johannes Brahms, 96.

accidental changes concerning the sixth and the seventh degrees of the original key, which are canceled out by the natural signs as seen in mm. 92-94.

Example 5 Modulation from C Minor to G Major Achieved through Accidental Usages[18]

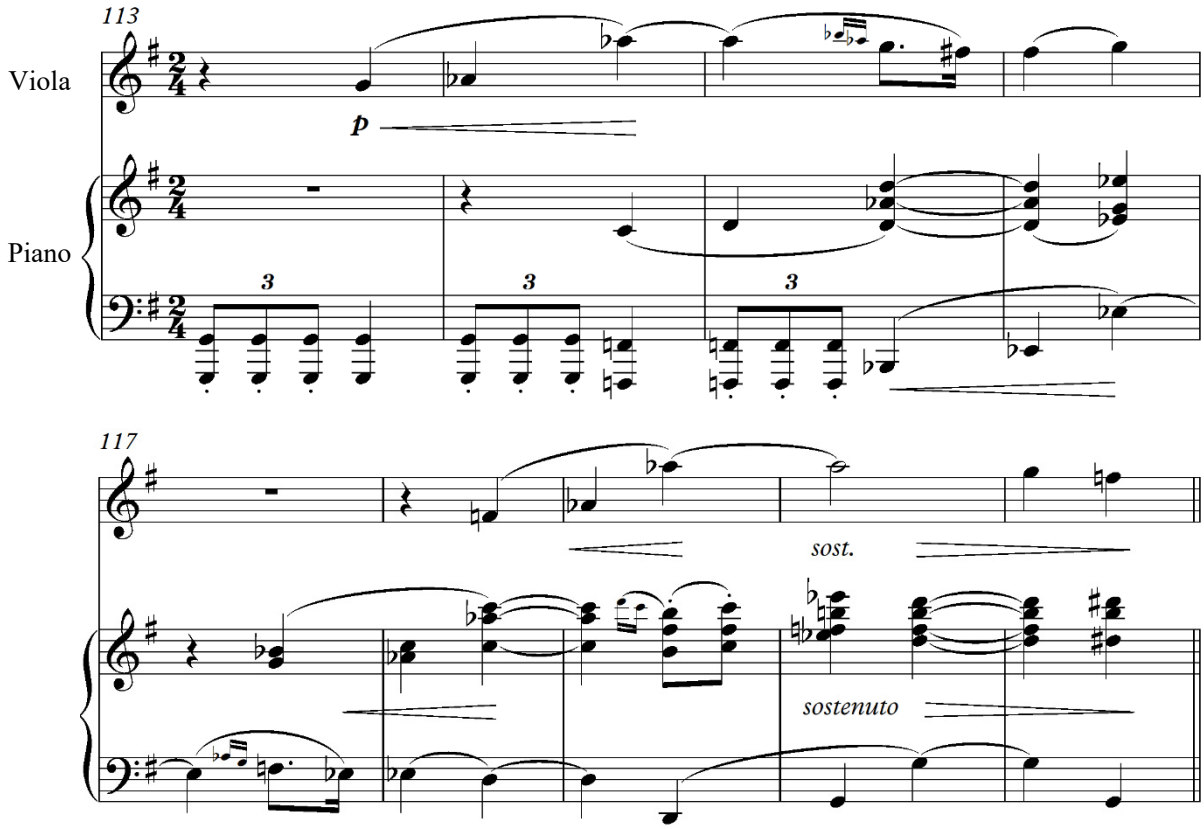


Continueing trhough *Più Moderato*, the piece progresses quickly toward the recapitulation—the return of the first main idea in m. 136. This lyrical passage, therefore, acts as a transitional section with a few subtle tonal shifts in mm. 113-121 as observed through accidentals: F natural, B♭, E♭, and A♭ (Example 6). These accidentals create an allusion of E♭ major harmony,

[18] Johannes Brahms, 97-98.

the relative major key to the original tonality of C minor. The E♭ major harmony quickly undergoes a chromatic modulation back to the strong reestablishment of G major as seen in mm. 122-135 (Example 7) serving as a dominant function that later plays a big role in bringing back the main theme.

Example 6 A Brief Harmonic Allusion of E♭ Major, A Relative Major Key to C Minor[19]



Legato playing in the string part is crucial for acquiring sufficient tone quality and maintaining a well-balanced ensemble sound. Connected tones require not only appropriate bow lengths to accommodate both short and extended phrases, but also effective use of *Vibrato* to preserve distinctive tone colors—especially when the string part is featured

[19] Johannes Brahms, 98.

primarily. For violists, the amount and intensity of *Vibrato* must be carefully considered and adjusted according to the role or importance of their part or phrases at any given moment of chamber playing.[20] For instance, in mm. 113-116, the viola introduces a *Legato* melodic line that serves as a primary gesture in this transitional section. The phrase is subsequently imitated by the piano a measure later, transposed a fifth lower. In this passage, the viola should employ prominent *Vibrato* at the beginning of the phrase to highlight its initial melodic idea. However, when the piano takes over in a call-and-response fashion and reach its own climatic point later in mm. 120, a consistently strong *Vibrato* in the viola part will be deemed inappropriate. Instead, the violist should gradually lessen the *Vibrato* to allow the piano's imitation to come to the fore.

Another notable performance choice in this section, for the piano, adheres to the previous interpretation of controlled expression: dynamics and timings. If not follow properly, the sonic juxtaposing of rapid harmonic activities would deter the radical effect of the transition with unnecessary harmonic fluctuations. In other words, the shift should remain relatively transient and undisruptive. Especially for viola, the inner voices must be brought out in the same fashion as Example 1 to accommodate for the special resonant *Alto* range whereas violin would mostly be more resonant in the *Soprano*'s top notes.

Approaching the restatement of the main theme in the recapitulation, the G major lyrical phrases or the retransition must be done in an intimate and mature manner, namely unexaggerated in terms of *rubati*, dynamic contrasts, and tone changes. The section remains on the softer side of *piano* and a half-voice playing of *sostenuto*. Only the small climax in mm. 132 gets its spotlight from an organic *crescendo* buildup to *forte* as indicated on the score and according to the fluctuation of the melodic contour. The exact representation of the main theme in compound meter in mm. 136 brings back stronger, more satirical characteristic that renders stark contrast to previously heard materials closing of the piece with a purposeful dramatization.

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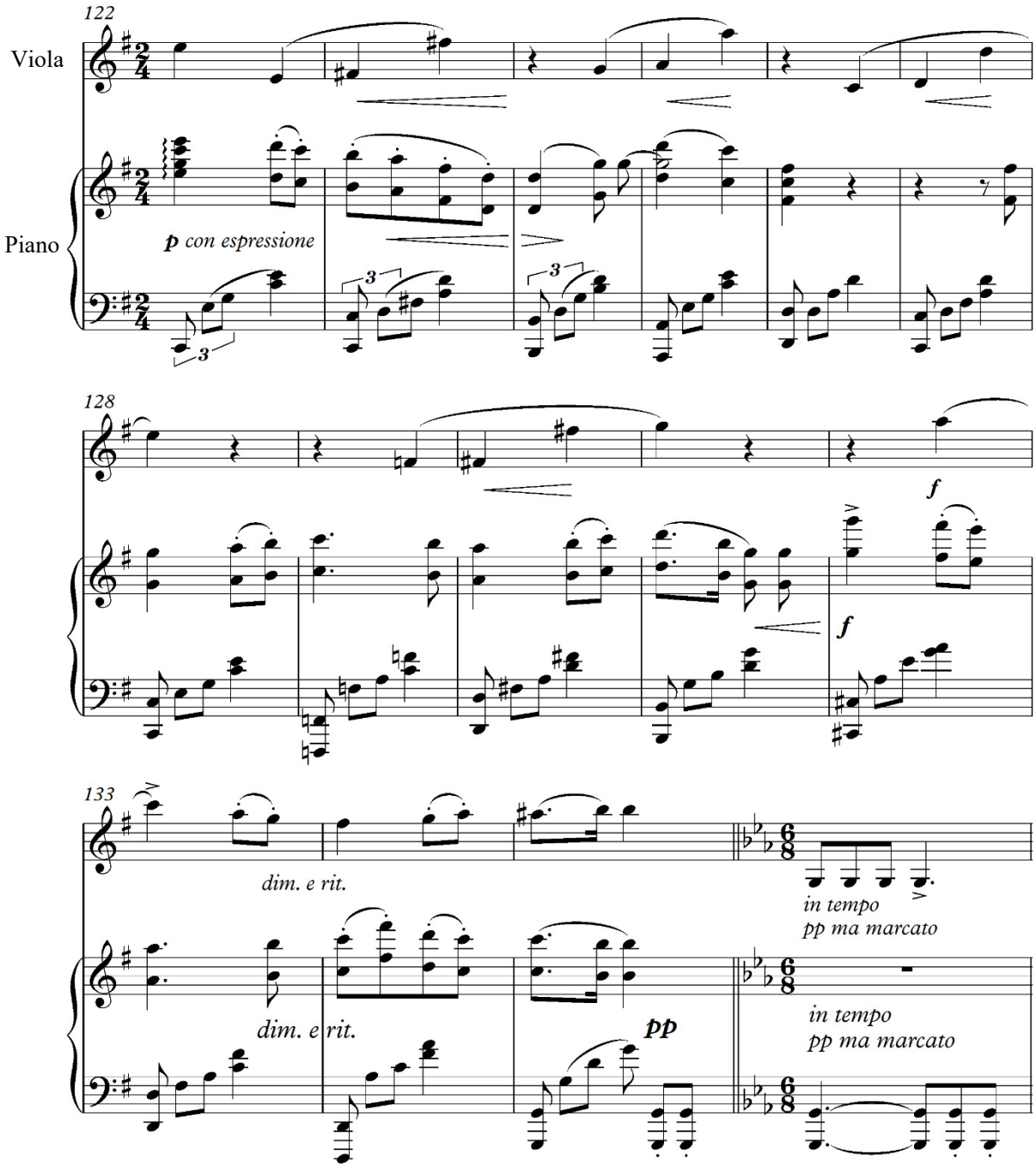
[20] Kulisara Sangchan and Noraath Chanklum, "The Analysis of Sonata for Piano and Violin No. 2 Opus 100 for a Violin Recital," *Rangsit Music Journal* 18, 2 (2023): 28, https://so06.tcithaijo.org/index.php/rmj/article/view/248707/182917. (in Thai)

Example 7 The G Major Lyrical Passage Before the Recapitulation in Compound Meter[21]

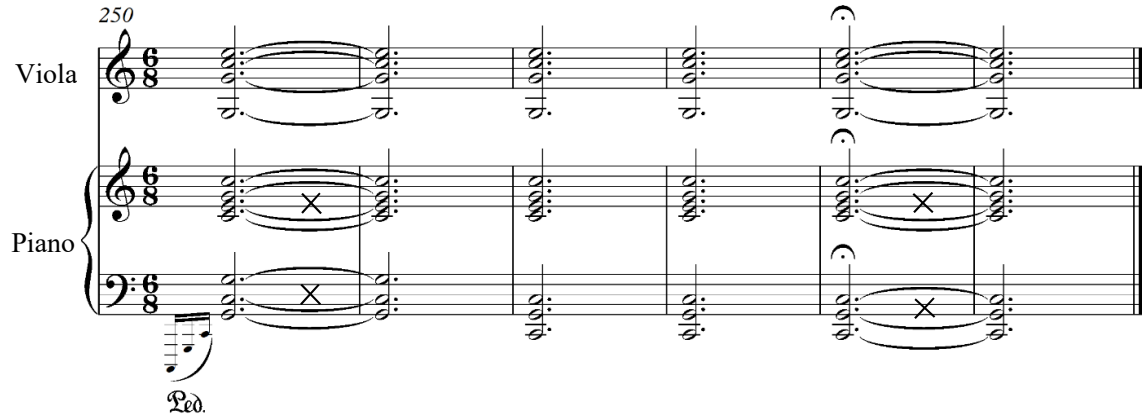


[21] Johannes Brahms, 98-99.

The recapitulation, when presented itself in the exact form, calls for alternative sonic experiences. *In tempo* marking must be made organically. In other words, changes in speeds shall not be abrupt; rather, the preceding section and the recapitulation must be connected by only a subtle shift in *tempi*. The aforementioned performance choice to seamlessly bridge the two parts proves effective—not in terms of formal realization, but in its ability to further shift the tone colors, marking a distinct turn in the main theme upon its restatement.

To expand upon the shift in tone colors, the pianist may apply more tension to the inner voices in the form of 'voicing' technique toward the pitches that would be occupied by the thumbs in both hands in order to develop a markedly darker statement for the gesture in the original tonality. This is achievable solely because of the placements of the inner voices that lie closely or are within the *Alto* range, intensify the 'somber' nature of the viola's tone. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the returning theme may vary as there are endless techniques and styles that accompanists are accustomed to. The same principle goes to the very final measures of the movement.

Example 8 A Guideline to Separate the Tied Chord Tones to Accommodate Viola[22]



The droning gesture of repetitive chordal playing in C major harmony is realized through tied dotted half notes, as demonstrated in mm. 250–255, or the final six measures of the

[22] Johannes Brahms, 103.

movement (Example 8). When the viola assumes the solo role, however, the harmonic support in these concluding measures may function more effectively without the use of ties. This is due to several factors, including the viola's natural timbral characteristics, the heightened interpretive tension in the recapitulation, and the physical demands of bowing for the soloist. In the excerpt, the deliberate separation of the identical harmony is marked with Xs.

Conclusion

The ability to distinguish the sounds of the violin and viola may not be important at all from the view point of the performers, especially in the perception of the piano accompanist. The most important aspect, however, lies upon the adjustability to specific timbres, articulated musical ideas, and some technical limitations that the string soloist face while delivering the piece to the best of their ability. The critical thinking steps have been examined here as a performing guide for those who are interested in the arts of advanced chamber accompaniment. Some slight changes in the way the pianists interpret the sonata must be, not only being vaguely considered, rather strictly followed if aiming for the most desirable sonic collaboration.

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