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Brahms's Non-Strophic Settings of Stanzaic Poetry: Three Case Studies

ABSTRACT

In just twelve of the over 150 solo settings of stanzaic poems that Brahms composed, the musical architecture is at odds with the poem's stanzaic structure. In each case, the non-congruence can be traced to frictions between poetic and linguistic domains. After defining various forms of non-congruence, the non-strophic designs of 'Nachklang' (Op. 59 No. 4), 'Verrat' (Op. 105 No. 5), and 'Eine gute, gute Nacht' (Op. 59 No. 6) are examined. Brahms's musical designs are shown to be correlated with changes in various domains: semantic focus, time frame, discourse or narrative function, and the persona's emotions.

1. INTRODUCTION

A lyric poem has a structural rhythm defined by poetic features — rhyme, meter, lineation, and stanzaic division — in addition to structural rhythms in a variety of linguistic domains — syntax, phonology, semantics, discourse, and narrative. 'What the composer does, then, when he sets a poem to music', wrote Edward T. Cone, 'is to choose one among all its forms — or, more accurately, [...], [to delimit] one subset [of] possible forms' (Cone 1989, 119). Formal design is thus always at issue, even the choice of a strictly strophic setting. And it rises to the fore when, due to friction between poetic and linguistic structures, the composer chooses a musical form that runs contrary to a poem's stanzaic design.

Non-strophic design is not a choice that Brahms made often, and it seems to run counter to the advice he gave to Gustav Jenner, namely, that if a text permits a strophic setting, then that is what the composer should choose (Jenner 1905, 31). Brahms set over 150 stanzaic poems as solo songs. And in over 90 percent of these, the units of thematic and tonal structure are congruent with individual stanzas or pairs of stanzas. But there are twelve settings of stanzaic poems in which the musical architecture is not fully congruent with the stanzaic structure, three of which are the focus of this study.¹

Formal non-congruence is the product of a clear conflict between the structural rhythms of the stanzaic poem and the formal articulation of the music. There are two types of non-congruence: in one type, a formal articulation in the music subdivides a stanza, and in the other type, the continuation of a formal unit in the music suppresses a stanza break, thus joining one stanza to the next. In this paper, I examine a case of each type and a special case that has multiple forms of non-congruence.

2. A SUBDIVIDED STANZA

'Nachklang' (Op. 59 No. 4) is the setting of an untitled poem that Klaus Groth, Brahms's lifelong friend and fellow

north German, inscribed in Brahms's copy of Groth's *Hundert Blätter*:

- 1 Regentropfen aus den Bäumen
- 2 Fallen in das grüne Gras,
- 3 Thränen meiner trüben Augen
- 4 Machen mir die Wange naß.
- 5 Wenn die Sonne wieder scheint,
- 6 Wird der Rasen doppelt grün:
- 7 Doppelt wird auf meinen Wangen
- 8 Mir die heiße Thräne glühn

(Raindrops from the trees fall in the green grass, tears from my cloudy eyes make my cheeks damp.

When the sun shines again, the lawn will be twice as green: twice as glowing will be the hot tears on my cheeks.)

The stanzaic structure of the poem is supported by many features. Each stanza is a complex punctuated sentence, and there is a grammatical contrast between the two: present progressive verbs in the first stanza, future conditional constructions in the second, and these correspond to two different time frames: during and then after the rain.

Schemes of interrupted cross rhyme further define the stanzas and also articulate the internal division of each stanza into couplets. Stanzas and couplets are delineated by semantic parallelism: natural images of rain and sunshine in the first couplets, answered by human images of tears in the second couplets. And each couplet contains one main, independent clause.

On the whole, then, a strophic setting of some type is clearly warranted. And that is precisely the choice Brahms made when he first set the poem in 1872, under the title 'Regenlied' (later published as WoO 23). But then some months later, in early 1873, Brahms composed a second setting of the poem under a new title, 'Nachklang', and set three other poems by Groth. The new title denotes an effect or thought that lingers in one's mind. Besides alluding to the fact that the new setting echoes and refashions the music of the song that precedes it in Op. 59, also titled 'Regenlied', the title draws attention to an event in the poem. It draws attention to what occurs after the rain has ceased and thus what transpires in the poem's second stanza, which is where Brahms's makes an unusual formal choice.

Brahms's second setting of the poem is not strophic (Figure 1). To begin with, he lengthens the second stanza by repeating the final line, creating a ninth unit of text. And his melodic phrasing, articulated by rests, divides the text irregularly, not into two, four, eight, or even nine segments, but into seven segments. Each of the seven segments is initiated with a dotted motive borrowed from 'Regenlied', but only three are initiated with the motive on the fifth scale degree. Four segments end weakly with appoggiaturas, and three end with strong melodic cadences. The intersection of initiations on the fifth scale degree and strong melodic endings produces three sections: lines 1–4, 5–6, and 7–8. Piano interludes reinforce the resultant division.

¹ See Snarrenberg (2017) for an account of all twelve songs.

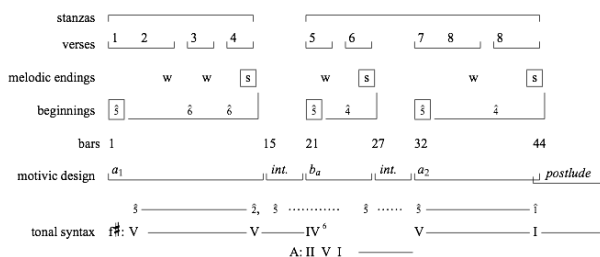


Fig. 1. Formal aspects of ‘Nachklang’ (Op. 59 No. 4).

The tonal syntax also divides into three units: an inconclusive descent from the fifth scale degree in F-sharp minor, ending with a half cadence; an auxiliary progression in the median region of A major, sustaining the same scale degree; and a complete, conclusive descent from the fifth scale degree in F-sharp minor, ending with a full cadence. The interludes and postlude extend the closing harmonies of each unit.²

The middle section of ‘Nachklang’ is differentiated from the outer sections in several ways. The outer sections are basically quotations from ‘Regenlied’, while the middle section is more like a paraphrase. The middle section also has a markedly different accompaniment pattern and takes place in a contrasting tonality. It deviates so much from the model that it makes the third section sound like a return and re-initiation. Thus the overall form has the effect of a rounded design in which the initiation of the reprise interrupts the second stanza.

The contrasting music of the second section, which immediately slips into the key of A major and is lighter in texture than the framing sections, is clearly warranted by the shift of time frame — the emergence of the sun after the rain. The unusual moment in the song is the return of the *a* material in the middle of the second stanza. This return to gloomier, ‘rainy’ music contradicts the continuation of the sunlit scene. The colon at the end of line 6 focuses our attention on what lingers on in the persona. And therein lies the contrast that Brahms composes into the second stanza: The sun may dry the rain, but it cannot dry the tears (Fellinger 1992, 219). On the contrary, the person weeps more in spite of the newly emerged sun.

3. A SUPPRESSED STANZA BREAK

‘Verrat’ is a narrative poem by Karl Lemcke, a tragic story of betrayal. A woman takes a lover while her man is away. Returning earlier than expected, the man overhears the woman arranging another assignation. The man swears and then takes his vengeance.

- 1 Ich stand in einer lauen Nacht
- 2 An einer grünen Linde,
- 3 Der Mond schien hell, der Wind ging sacht,
- 4 Der Gießbach floß geschwinde.
- 5 Die Linde stand vor Liebchens Haus,
- 6 Die Thüre hört’ ich knarren.
- 7 Mein Schatz ließ sacht ein Mannsbild ’raus,
- 8 ‘Laß morgen mich nicht harren;
- 9 Laß mich nicht harren, süßer Mann,
- 10 Wie hab ich dich so gerne!
- 11 An’s Fenster klopfte leise an,
- 12 Mein Schatz ist in der Ferne’.

13 Laß ab vom Druck und Kuß, Feinslieb,
 14 Du Schöner im Sammetkleide,
 15 Nun spüte dich, du feiner Dieb,
 16 Ein Mann harrt auf der Heide.
 17 Der Mond scheint hell, der Rasen grün
 18 Ist gut zu uns’rem Begegnen,
 19 Du trägst ein Schwert und nickst so kühn,
 20 Deine Liebschaft will ich segnen! —
 21 Und als erschien der lichte Tag,
 22 Was fand er auf der Heide?
 23 Ein Todter in den Blumen lag
 24 Zu einer Falschen Leide.

(I stood one warm night by a green linden-tree; the moon shone brightly, the wind blew gently, the torrent flowed swiftly. The linden-tree stood before my darling’s house, I heard the door creak. My sweetheart quietly let out a man’s form: ‘Tomorrow don’t keep me waiting. Don’t keep me waiting, sweet man, how much I love you! Knock gently on the window, for my sweetheart is far away!’ Cease your hugging and kissing, dear, you handsome lad in velvet, make haste now, you fine thief, a man awaits you on the heath. The moon shines brightly, the green grass is good for our encounter, you wear a sword and nod so boldly; let me bless your wooing! — And when the light of day appeared, what did it find on the heath? A dead man lay in the flowers to the grief of a false woman.)

Although the poem has six stanzas, Brahms suppresses the division between stanzas 2 and 3 and composes only five thematic units, rhetorically marking the end of each with a repetition of its final word. It is easy to see why Brahms would want to fuse stanzas 2 and 3, for the woman’s quoted speech begins in line 8 and continues past the semicolon on into the third stanza. Yet, while he clearly avoids a formal break in the middle of her utterance and aligns the end of it with a formal cadence, he does not correlate the beginning of her speech with the initiation of a formal unit, much less one that offers contrast. Rather, the five lines of her speech are embedded in an expanded variant of the first thematic unit.

Brahms’s design, with its thematic rounding and division into five parts, brings out the narrative structure of the poem (Figure 2). The first stanza presents a state of narrative equilibrium (EQ): the persona standing outside the house.³ The stable narrative state is fittingly represented by a fully closed thematic unit. The second stanza continues to describe the placid scene, hence it makes sense that the first couplet of stanza 2 musically parallels the opening of stanza 1. The first musical departure from parallelism in stanza 2 is the less active accompaniment in bars 20–21, just where the persona mentions the disturbing sight of seeing the woman’s new lover exiting their home, before he even hears her voice.

² For a detailed analysis of the voice-leading, see Platt (1992, 258–9).

³ My account of narrative functions is based on the narratological theory found in Kafalenos (2006).

verses	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-16	17-20	21-24
stanzas	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
bars	1	15	34	45	60	
motivic design	a_1	a_2	b_1	b_2	a_3	
form	A_1		B		A_2	
activity	<i>passive</i>		<i>active</i>		<i>passive</i>	
narrative	EQ	A	C, C'	H	(I), EQ	
tonal syntax	(I — V I)	I	V; #III	V; (I — V I)		
place	<i>outside the house</i>		<i>on the heath</i>			
time	<i>night</i>		<i>later that night</i>	<i>the next day</i>		
voice	<i>persona</i>	<i>woman</i>	<i>persona</i>			

Fig. 2. Formal aspects of 'Verrat' (Op. 105 No. 5).

The parallelism in the vocal line breaks down two bars later when the woman begins to speak. The vocal line becomes repetitive and speech-like. The accompaniment, too, becomes repetitive, but it also continues the parallelism with the first stanza, using a transposition of bar 10, and continues unabated until the voice in bar 30 at last picks up its own motive from bar 10 to conclude the overall parallelism with stanza one. The concluding motive is altered to suit the half cadence, which is appropriate to the narrative moment, since the consequences of the events related are as yet unknown.

The narrator has thus far described an initial state of equilibrium (EQ) and its disturbance (A). The next stages of the narrative involve purposive action on the part of the persona. The persona decides to respond (C) to the destabilizing event and takes the first step (C'), which is to go to the heath to intercept the lover. Then the persona takes the primary action to alleviate the problem: he attacks the lover (H) and, we must infer, successfully kills him (I). These stages correspond to stanzas 4 and 5, which Brahms sets to a pair of thematic units on a much livelier theme in the contrasting key of E-flat minor. At the end of stanza 5, the persona utters the verb *segnen*, which signifies the decisive act by means of which he will achieve his desired end. And it is precisely here that Brahms initiates a modulation back to the tonic key. The final stanza describes the aftermath, which is a new state of equilibrium (EQ) arising from the persona's actions. The final thematic unit, like the first, is appropriately a tonally self-sufficient structure.

In short, the tonal syntax corresponds to the sequence of narrative functions, while the large-scale ternary structure corresponds to the person's involvement in the narrative: first as a passive observer, then as an active participant, and again as a passive observer.

4. A SPECIAL CASE

'Eine gute, gute Nacht' (Op. 59 No. 6), is a special case of non-congruence. An unusual repetition of a verse may explain Brahms's unusual setting of this poem by Georg Friedrich Daumer. The speaker in the poem is a frustrated man who wants to sleep with a woman. But the woman, despite routinely bidding him good night, never gives him the good night he wants.

- 1 Eine gute, gute Nacht
- 2 Pflegst du mir zu sagen —
- 3 Ueber dieses eitle Wort,
- 4 O wie muß ich klagen!

- 5 Daß du meiner Seele
- 6 Glut Nicht so grausam nährtest!
- 7 'Eine gute, gute Nacht',
- 8 Daß du sie gewährtest!

(A good, good night you dutifully say to me — over this empty phrase, o how I must lament!

Would that you did not nourish my soul's fervor so cruelly! 'A good, good night', would that you granted it!)

Brahms composes a rather witty setting of the man's complaint, a setting in which frequent repetitions and echoes of short musical phrases duplicate the teasing repetition within the woman's empty phrase, 'Eine gute, gute Nacht'.

verses	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(8)
bars	1	7	14	19	27	31	36			
motivic design	a_1	b_1	c_1	a_2	b_2	c_2	<i>post.</i>			
cadences	T: HC		T: FC	D: FC		T: HC		T: FC		
form	A_1				A_2					
tonal syntax				V;				V-I.		

Fig. 3. Formal aspects of 'Eine gute, gute Nacht' (Op. 59 No. 6).

The accompaniment unfolds as a binary form (Figure 3). Each 18-bar section, irregularly subdivided into three thematic units, corresponds to a stanza of poetry. What makes this setting unusual is the non-congruent design of the vocal part, the phrasing of which is only sporadically in agreement with the accompaniment's thematic design. And the relationship between voice and accompaniment changes considerably in the second half of the song, where Brahms redistributes the lines of verse among the piano's three thematic units. Brahms also repeats two lines in the second stanza. In the end, very little melodic material from the first half of the song is repeated in the second half. The tension in the formal design mirrors the tension that exists between the two characters in the poem.

What is ostensibly a prelude, complete with a preparatory half cadence, is the first thematic unit in the accompaniment. The melodic rhythm of this 'introduction' fits the text of the poem's title, as if the piano speaks the woman's words that bring the man to the moment in which the poem is uttered (Example 1).



Ex. 1. The piano's introduction to 'Eine gute, gute Nacht' (Op. 59 No. 6), with implied text.

The introductory gesture as a whole is not entirely satisfying from a musical standpoint. The prelude seems as if it might start a Schoenbergian sentence, with a repeated two-bar phrase that will empty into a four-bar cadential phrase. But the cadential phrase is only a scant two bars in length, and its closing dominant is cut one beat short by the entrance of the voice and the commencement of a new phrase. This will not be the only time that listeners are denied a good ending.

The voice enters with new material in the pickup to bar 7, accompanied by the piano. The piano echoes the ending of the phrase, but before it has finished, the voice re-enters and, instead of chiming in with the piano, starts a new phrase. The two

nevertheless manage to concur on a cadence in the main tonic (bar 11), bringing the second thematic unit to a close. The cadential phrase, however, is a bit abrupt, lasting only three beats instead of four, and it brings a close in A minor rather than the C major proffered by the first two phrases. This is the second instance of a brief and unsatisfying conclusion.

The piano mimics the vocal cadence (twice) before surging into a third thematic unit, which starts with the *rinforzando* in bar 14. Or, at least something new starts here in the accompaniment. The voice begins with an anacrusis to bar 15, and concludes its first phrase in bar 16, which overlaps the beginning of the piano's next small unit. The singer attempts to imitate the right hand. And yet once again, despite their differences, singer and pianist manage to cadence together, now in the dominant.

The piano begins a repetition of the 'prelude' in bar 19, only to be overlaid with a new vocal phrase already in bar 20. When the second of the voice's staggered phrases ends in the applied dominant (bar 23), one harmony before the end of the piano's unit, the voice repeats line 6. But the repetition runs long, and the piano, after vamping in the dominant, occludes the vocal cadence in bar 26 with the start of the next thematic unit.

The piano's wry evocation of the woman's 'good night' in bars 27–28 depicts the man's expectant attitude, as he waits once again for the woman to utter her empty words. And then the singer utters the greeting. Brahms has cleverly designed the vocal melody to create the effect of quotation within the song, matching the repeated verse (lines 1 and 7) with the only vocal phrase that is repeated verbatim from the song's first half. The musical quotation substitutes for the quotation marks that Brahms deleted from Daumer's poem.

Unlike the first stanza, there is no attempt at a cadence at the end of the quoted phrase; so much for the anticipation of a good night's rendezvous. Instead, the voice leaps ahead in bar 30 with an anticipation of the third thematic unit. The singer's phrases are now somewhat closer to being congruent with the units in the accompaniment, though even here the singer enters first one beat ahead of the piano and then a half beat after the piano, in both cases with syncopated notes. Singer and pianist nevertheless appear to cadence together. But of course it is not meant to be a moment of entirely happy agreement. The vocal line does not descend to the tonic scale degree but instead rises to the raised third degree, and the piano adds a lowered seventh degree. In place of the anticipated closure, the piano initiates a series of dominants, prolonging the persona's state of unrequited desire.

Every phrase in the song begins in a state of harmonic instability. This incessant repetition of forward-pointing tonal syntax fits the persona's attitude of looking forward to a sexually satisfying night. And the pervasive mismatches between piano and voice seem to epitomize the incompatible designs of the two characters.

5. CONCLUSION

Close analysis of Brahms's non-strophic settings of stanzaic poetry reveals that his formal designs are composerly responses to forms of structural complexity created by the poet and, in particular, to conflicts between the poetry's overt formal structure and the subtler rhythms created in other domains of language by changes in such things as the grammatical mood of the poem's verbs (indicative, imperative, subjunctive, real-

is/irrealis); the persona's attention (digressions or interruptions in a train of thought, a shift of focus between inner and outer worlds); temporal focus (the lyric present and the persona's past or future experience); emotional valence (sadness, relief); semantic focus (imagery, topic); discourse function (dialogue, quotation, requests and commands, descriptions and wishes); and narrative aspects (characters, scenes, agency).

KEYWORDS

Form, Music Hermeneutics, Vocal Music, Music and Poetry.

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