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ON THE SLOW MOVEMENT OF BRAHMS'S F-MINOR CLARINET SONATA:

THIRDS-CYCLES, *DIATONIE*, AND *TODESANGST*

EDWARD KLORMAN

The two sonatas of op. 120 occupy a special position among Brahms's late works. As the culmination of his clarinet "project"—those pieces Brahms wrote after the famed clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld enticed him out of retirement—they stand as his (perhaps self-consciously) final works of instrumental chamber music and his final multi-movement compositions. This article examines the second movement of the opus's first sonata (*Andante un poco adagio*), a ternary form with two aspects that warrant particular analytical attention: (1) the pervasive, surface-level rhythmic displacements that obscure the relationship between melody and bass throughout the A section and (2) the major-thirds cycle in the B section. I will show that these features are, in fact, related and may further suggest an extramusical interpretation pertaining to the sonata's lateness—within Brahms's output and within the "classical" tonal tradition.

The A Section (mm. 1–22)

Details of texture, register, and rhythm cloud the movement's opening. While the very first sonority sounds like a tonic triad, the F in the piano's left hand on the second eighth note complicates the harmony, suggesting that the initial verticality may have been the upper parts of an F-minor-seventh chord whose bass had not yet been sounded. But the mid-bar B $\flat$ further confuses the harmony since it conflicts with the upper voices. This apparent disconnect between

upper voices and the syncopated bass-line obtains throughout much of the A section, establishing an ethereal atmosphere reminiscent of Brahms's Intermezzo op. 119 no. 1—that is, the opening piece of the immediately preceding opus.

EXAMPLE 1. Opening (mm. 1–4)

Andante un poco Adagio

The musical score for the opening of Brahms's F-minor Clarinet Sonata, measures 1-4. The tempo is 'Andante un poco Adagio' and the dynamics are 'poco f'. The piano part features a syncopated bass line with notes on the 2nd and 4th beats of each measure. The clarinet part has a melodic line with some grace notes.

EXAMPLE 1A. Score (mm. 1–4)

The musical score for the opening of Brahms's F-minor Clarinet Sonata, measures 1-4, with figured bass notation below the piano part. The figured bass notation is as follows:

A.
 I II⁷ V⁷ I

B.
 I II ⁹⁻⁸/₄₋₃ V⁷ I

C.
 I II V I VI

D.
 suggests: (I VI) (VII°/VI)

EXAMPLE 1B. A possible derivation of mm. 1–4 (after Samarotto)

Example 1C shows two stages of a harmonic progression in F minor. Stage A shows a simple progression: I (F3), II⁷ (G4), V⁷ (C5), and I (F3). Stage B shows the same progression embellished with suspensions and 'ant.' markings. Stage C shows a more complex progression: I 5-6 (F3), II⁷ (G4), V⁷ 8-8 (C5), and I 6 (F3). Stage D shows a rhythmic pattern: I 5-6 (F3), II⁷ (G4), V⁷ (C5), and I 6 (F3).

EXAMPLE 1C. Alternative derivation of mm. 1–4

How are we to reconcile the upper-voice harmonies with the syncopated bass notes? Examples 1B and 1C present two possible interpretations.¹ In Ex. 1B, a simple progression, shown in Stage A, is embellished with suspensions in Stage B. In Stage C, the initial tonic is relegated to an unstated m. 0; according to this analysis, the piece begins with an auxiliary cadence, since the first *actual* measure of the piece is already the supertonic harmony with the upper voices suspended from the imaginary initial tonic. A rhythmic pattern is added in Stage D, which introduces the syncopations into the bass line. An alternative interpretation is shown in Ex. 1C: the same initial progression in Stage A is transformed with a pattern of bass

¹ This analysis in Ex. 1B is based on Samarotto 2003. I am grateful to Frank Samarotto for sharing his unpublished analysis.

anticipations shown in Stage B. Additional details are added in Stage C—namely, a 5–6 exchange in m. 1 and a chromatic passing tone in m. 3—and Stage D adds a rhythmic pattern to the accompaniment.

Inasmuch as both derivations are well formed, either is a plausible interpretation. The essential difference is this: whereas Ex. 1B shifts the score’s mid-bar bass notes to the left, Ex. 1C shifts them to the right. Ex. 1B thus understands the mid-bar bass notes to govern the entirety of the measures in which they occur and therefore elides the initial tonic. The first melody note would therefore be understood as a suspension (from a suppressed, “zeroth” measure) sounding against the governing, supertonic harmony.

However, the interpretation in Ex. 1C is (to my ears) more convincing for a number of reasons. In music of a *Lied* texture, I tend to hear the melody as given and therefore interpret the mid-bar bass notes as anticipations of their respective *following* measures in what amounts to a new kind of fourth-species counterpoint, one formed from a chain of syncopated anticipations rather than suspensions. Whereas anticipations are typically a fairly active, energetic kind of dissonance, the gentle atmosphere established here by the slow tempo, soft dynamic, and especially by the relatively long rhythmic duration of the anticipations gives them a particular, softer quality. A related consideration favoring Ex. 1C pertains to formal function: hearing mm. 1–4 as a sentential presentation, with the basic idea E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ (mm. 1–2) repeated sequentially as D $\flat$ –C (mm. 3–4), tends to support hearing the melodic E $\flat$ as commencing in m. 1 rather than being suspended from an imaginary m. 0. Further support for this interpretation is given in Ex. 2, which provides a figured-bass reduction of the complete A section based on the

premise of Ex. 1C. Note the double counterpoint in mm. 17–18: the bass $G\flat$ – F is counterpointed by $E\flat$ – $D\flat$ in the melody, and then the voices switch, transforming parallel sixths into tenths.

This double counterpoint is revealed only if the syncopated bass notes are interpreted as anticipations as per Ex. 1C.

The image displays a musical score for the A section of Brahms' F-minor Clarinet Sonata, specifically a thoroughbass reduction of measures 1 through 22. The score is organized into two systems: 'Antecedent' (measures 1-12) and 'Consequent' (measures 13-22). Each system features a piano accompaniment with a figured bass line below the notes. The figured bass notation includes numbers 1-7 and symbols such as 'ant.', 'HC', and 'PAC' to denote harmonic structure and phrasing. The Antecedent system includes measures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. The Consequent system includes measures 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22. The score is written in F-minor, with a key signature of three flats.

EXAMPLE 2. Thoroughbass reduction of A section (mm. 1–22)

The A section comprises a parallel period whose constituent phrases are both loosely knit sentences. By “loosely knit,” I refer to the expansion of the intermediate harmony in the continuation/cadential segment of each phrase, as shown in the graph in Ex. 3.² The antecedent phrase, which constitutes the first branch of the interruption, contains a long composing-out of

² On the metaphors of “tight” and “loose” construction, see Caplin 1998, 17 and *passim*.

The image displays a musical score for Klorman's Brahms F-Minor Clarinet Sonata, measures 1-22. The score is written for Clarinet and Piano. The Clarinet part features a complex melodic line with many slurs and ties. The Piano part provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggios. The score includes fingering numbers (1-7) and breath marks for the Clarinet. The Piano part includes dynamic markings like '5th' and 'N'. The score is divided into two systems, each with a repeat sign at the beginning and end.

EXAMPLE 3. Graphs of A section (mm. 1–22)

the II harmony, which extends the span of $\wedge^2$ in the *Urlinie*. The second branch of the interruption, the consequent phrase, begins parallel to the antecedent and likewise involves a long expansion of the intermediate harmonies IV and II, which support $\wedge^2$ in the *Urlinie*.

B-section (harp-like piano figuration)

Antecedent phrase

21 *dim.* *pp* *p dolce* *pp*

26 *p* *pp*

Incipient consequent phrase

30 *dolce* *pp* *dolce* *pp*

35 *p* *pp*

Cadence "rhymes" with mm. 29–30

O. M. T. cadential repetition

39 *p* *cresc.* *p* *pp*

44 *p* *pp*

Major-thirds cycle

Recapitulation (=third statement of ongoing cycle)

EXAMPLE 4. Score (mm. 21–52)

The B Section (mm. 23–48)

The B section of this movement contains some of the most remarkable music in Brahms's chamber-music *oeuvre* (see score extract in Ex. 4). One distinctive aspect, apparent at the very outset, is the beautiful whole-tone sequence in mm. 23–27 (see bass notes D $\flat$, C $\flat$ and B $\flat\flat$).

This equal-interval sequence presages a later progression used as a retransition: in m. 41, after an arrival in E major (which is F $\flat$ major respelled, or $\flat$ VI), a major-thirds cycle tonicizes E major for four measures, then C major, and finally A $\flat$ major for the return of the A section. Richard Cohn has argued that such major-thirds cycles are “paradoxical from a Schenkerian/linear perspective” since they depart from the underlying *Diatonie* of Schenker’s framework.³ Howard Cinnamon (1984, 1986) notes that such cycles appear to arpeggiate an augmented triad, a harmony that is ineligible for composing-out in the usual sense. How might we integrate this passage into our Schenkerian reading? I suggest that the solution lies, as it often does, in approaching this passage from a melodic, linear perspective, rather than a harmonic one.

The opening phrase of the B section is based on a descending minor tetrachord, shown with beamed bass notes in Ex. 5: D $\flat$ (mm. 23–24), C $\flat$ (m. 25–26), B $\flat\flat$ (m. 27–28), and A $\flat$ (m. 29–30).⁴ This bass-line tetrachord is followed in parallel tenths by the melody; the melody

³ Cohn 1996, 11. The Schenkerian literature on major-thirds cycles begins with Schenker himself: his *Tonwille* essay on Beethoven’s “Appassionata” sonata includes a graph of the major-thirds cycle in the development section, and he provides a footnote mentioning similar cycles in Chopin’s Etude in A Minor, op. 25, no. 11 and Wolf’s song “Das Ständchen” (Schenker 2005 [1923–24], 46). Graphs of the Chopin and Wolf examples, along with the slow movement of Beethoven’s “Spring” sonata, appear in Schenker 1979 [1935], fig. 100, 6a. Thirds-cycles are treated extensively in Proctor 1978 and Cinnamon 1984 and 1986. On A $\flat$ –C–E as the paradigmatic major-thirds cycle (as in the present movement and the Beethoven op. 57 and Chopin examples mentioned above), see Bribitzer-Stull 2006.

⁴ The A $\flat$ in the analysis is actually a G $\sharp$ in the score, since Brahms notates the cadence in C $\sharp$ minor, an enharmonic respelling of D $\flat$ minor.

note C is implied over the half-cadential dominant in mm. 29–30. *That* melodic tetrachord (F–E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –C) is itself a hidden repetition that hearkens back to the sonata’s first movement, in which it appeared prominently in F minor but also in A $\flat$ major (see below, Ex. 7). Another, more concrete repetition of the same minor-tetrachord motive appears in the melody in mm. 29–30: the melodic fourth D $\flat$ –C $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –A $\flat$ (highlighted with a bracket in Ex. 5) summarizes the bass line of the entire phrase.

As the passage begins to repeat in m. 31, it seems at first to be the incipient consequent phrase of a would-be parallel period, one that might have closed the B section with a PAC in D $\flat$ major. But instead the passage seems to veer off course in m. 35, heading toward E major (an enharmonically respelled $\flat$ VI). In mm. 37–38, the melodic descending tetrachord (E–D $\sharp$ –C $\sharp$ –B), which “rhymes” with the previous cadence (see brackets in Ex. 5), now marks a celebratory arrival in a major key. The exuberance of this arrival in $\flat$ VI is enhanced in mm. 39–40 by the one-more-time cadential repetition and melodic embellishment leading to the cadence in m. 41.⁵

This cadential arrival overlaps the beginning of the major-thirds cycle, which (loosely) quotes mm. 1–4, first in E major, then C major, and finally A $\flat$ major. The cycle creates a kind of high-level formal overlap or dovetail since it constitutes a thematic reprise of A-section music within the B section, before the tonal-structural return in m. 49. Yet, by the time that double bar is reached, the sense of recapitulatory “restarting” is muted since the return to A $\flat$ major sounds like the continuation of the ongoing cycle as much as the beginning of a new section. Another

⁵ On the aptly named “one-more-time” technique, see Schmalfeldt 1992.

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EXAMPLE 5. Thoroughbass reduction of B section (mm. 23–48), reprise (49–70) and coda (mm. 71–82)

factor that softens the sense of return in m. 49 is register: since each statement of the thirds-cycle brings the register successively lower, the clarinet's melody in m. 49 is a full octave lower than its original presentation had been in the movement's opening. This change of register, combined with the softer dynamic marking (*piano espressivo* in m. 49, compared to *poco forte* in m. 1) enhances the continuational aspect of this juncture. On the other hand, the sense of m. 49 as a new beginning is bolstered by the new triplet figuration that rhythmically distinguishes the A $\flat$ -major statement of the cycle from the previous two, gently marking the recapitulation. The cycle thus constitutes a characteristically Brahmsian permeable boundary between the main sections of the ternary form.

Another typically Brahmsian overlap is found within the cycle itself (compare the score excerpt in Ex. 4 to the reduction in Ex. 5). The first statement of the cycle (mm. 41–44) may seem at first hearing to express a I–II–V–I progression in E major, with the clarinet playing the mid-bar bass-note anticipations. But what of the harmony in m. 44? Although the clarinet's concert-E anticipation in m. 43 prospectively implies a resolution from the dominant ninth to tonic, the expected tonic harmony fails to materialize since the piano retains the dominant-ninth harmony over the clarinet's low E in m. 44. The problematic relationship between bass notes and upper-voice harmony that characterized the A section thus returns in this passage.

The clarinet's long E—seemingly the strongest bass note in the passage—might be regarded as a merely *apparent* bass note if the dominant chord is heard as resolving deceptively to its local $\flat$ VI (C major) in m. 45 for the next waypoint in the thirds cycle. This interpretation, shown in Ex. 5, regards the passage as a chromatic *Romanesca* sequence (Pachelbel *ohne*

Diatonie, as it were), with a linear-interval pattern of 5–7–5–7–5. According to this analysis, the clarinet’s emphatic concert E in mm. 43–44 is not the authentic-cadential bass resolution that it had prospectively seemed but rather serves as the common-tone glue from E major to C major. The piano’s unresolved dominant ninth (C) in mm. 43–44 likewise emphasizes the other common-tone connection to the following C-major harmony. An alternative hearing would interpret the clarinet’s E as a *bona fide* bass note and would regard m. 45 as a first-inversion C major harmony over a retained bass, essentially eliding the final tonic of the E 5/3 chord that ends the cycle’s first statement with the C 6/3 chord begins the next one through an implied 5–6 shift (or, in neo-Riemannian terms, through a PL transformation). The bass note E would be understood as a quasi-pedal in mm. 41–44 and would thereafter be subsumed within the following C major harmony as the chordal third.⁶

This passage is thus a subtle departure from Gregory Proctor’s and Cinnamon’s descriptions of such major-thirds cycles involving the transposition operation, which typically

⁶ This alternate hearing may suggest a different bass line composed of a whole-tone descent: the retained E in m. 45 would move to D in m. 46 and thence to C for another elided resolution (the implied C major 5/3 and A $\flat$ 6/3 harmonies), continuing to B $\flat$ in m. 50 and finally A $\flat$. This bass line, suggested to me by William Rothstein, proceeds mainly in parallel tenths with the melody. Its breach of strict sequential parallelism among the cycle’s three statements—interpreting the E major statement as a root-position chord from the outset but considering C major and A $\flat$ major statements to begin with 6/3 chords—could be justified by the different way the first iteration is approached.

feature a disjuncture in the voice leading between each statement of the cycle.⁷ Here Brahms smooths over the junctures with deceptive (or elided) resolutions of each dominant seventh. At the end of the piano's C-major statement, a similar deceptive motion (or elided resolution) arrives at the local $\flat$ VI ($A\flat$ major) in m. 49, thus securing the return of the original key at the double bar. What a subtle, delicate musical fabric this is, in which so many of the true bass *tones* are merely implied and so many of the actually sounded bass *notes* are not quite what they seem!⁸ Indeed, with the slippery bass line throughout the cycle, it would be difficult to conceive of a bass arpeggio from E to C to $A\flat$, since these bass notes are only problematically present on the musical surface.

Instead, I would point to a melodic continuity throughout the cycle: a whole-tone scale, beginning in m. 41 with two bars of melodic B, then A, then $G\sharp$, then $F\sharp$, connecting to $E\flat$ as we return, so to speak, to the real world—to *Diatonie* and to the normal half steps of the major mode—with the return of the melody $E\flat$ – $D\flat$ –C in mm. 49–51. This whole-tone scale is placed in a broader context in the Schenkerian graph in Ex. 6. The first part of the B-section, although locally in $D\flat$ major, actually emphasizes the global tonic chord, $A\flat$, in a kind of Phrygian progression involving the neighbor-note $B\flat$. We have already noted the parallel tenths between

⁷ Cinnamon describes “discontinuity of voice-leading” as “[o]ne of the most significant and distinctive feature[s]” of thirds-cycles that involve a transposition operation between iterations of the sequential module (Cinnamon 1984, 152). The transposition operation, and its role in some equal-interval cycles, was first theorized in Proctor 1978, 171–219.

⁸ On the distinction between abstract *tones* and concrete *notes*, see Rothstein 1991.

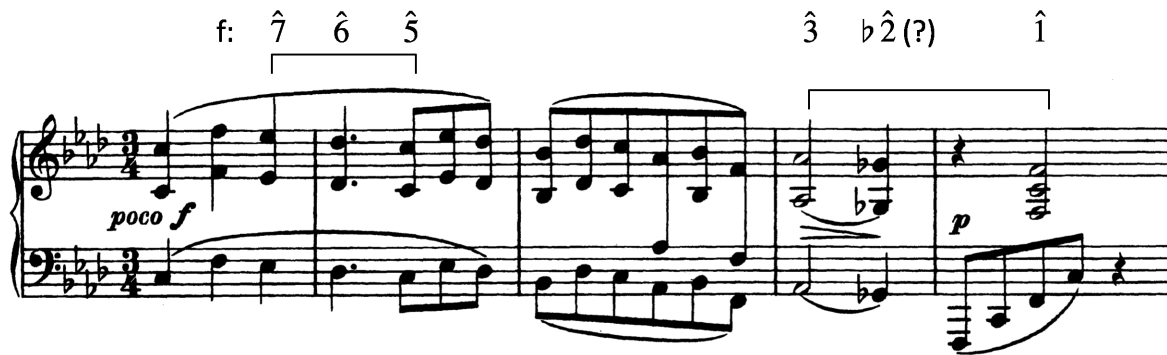
the bass tetrachord and the upper voice, F–E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ and (implied) C, thus invoking the iconic tetrachord of the tempestuous first movement.

But when the would-be consequent phrase commences in m. 31, it is as if the descending minor tetrachord is unhinged from the normal *Diatonie*. That is, the melody states F–E $\flat$ –D $\flat$... and then D $\flat$ is freed of its obligation, as a tendency tone, to resolve by half step and (respelled as C $\sharp$) continues a descent through the whole-tone scale. The scale, which spans a ninth, is a transformation of a step from the upper-neighbor note F to the *Kopft*on, E $\flat$. The chords of the major-thirds cycle are generated individually as consonant support for the notes of the whole-tone scale: the E major chord supports the melodic note B (m. 41) and the C major chord supports the G (m. 45). Thus, the E-major, C-major, and A $\flat$ -major chords of the thirds cycle are not directly connected to one another and do not represent the arpeggiation of an augmented chord. Rather, according to this analysis, the cycle arises through linear, melodic fluency—albeit a melody that steps beyond the bounds of *Diatonie*.

EXAMPLE 6. Graphs of complete movement

Transcending Todesangst ... and Diatonic

In the analysis of the B section, we have noted a hidden repetition of a motive drawn from the opening of the sonata's first movement. I plan to explore the consequences of the sonata's opening more fully in a future publication, but I will close here by mentioning a few suggestive connections. Walter Frisch has discussed how the mysterious opening of the first movement (shown in Ex. 7a) introduces a kind of tonal problem: where within the key should the half steps fall? The problematic pitch $G\flat$ complicates the initial establishment of F minor, and multivalence of the motives $E\flat-D\flat-C$ and $A\flat-G\flat-F$ becomes a focal point of the movement.⁹

EXAMPLE 7. Excerpts from first movement (Allegro appassionato)**EXAMPLE 7A.** Introduction (mm. 1–4)

⁹ Frisch 1984, 148. See also Smith 1998.

A $\flat$ – G $\flat$ – F

Paraphrase of introduction motive from mm. 1–2 ("fixated" on G $\flat$)

EXAMPLE 7B. Subordinate theme (mm. 37–43)

These strands' propensity for reharmonization is foregrounded when the motive A $\flat$ –G $\flat$ –F returns in D $\flat$ major as the movement's second theme (shown in Ex. 7B), a passage that seems to dwell on the problematic note G $\flat$. In a later passage from the development section (shown in Ex. 7C), the motive E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –C is reharmonized in A $\flat$ major, foreshadowing its later return in that key as the main theme of the second movement. At the very end of the first movement (shown in

Introduction motive (quoted at pitch) reharmonized in A $\flat$ major

EXAMPLE 7C. Development (mm. 96–100)

Piano: final assertion of F minor

Clarinet: re-asks original question (C–F–E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –C)

EXAMPLE 7D. Coda (mm. 223–36)

Ex. 7D), the piano attempts to resolve the issue once and for all by stating the introduction motive in an unalloyed F minor, the problematic pitch G $\flat$ having been exorcised. But the clarinet responds to the piano by, so to speak, repeating the initial question (C–F–E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –C), leaving a suspended, open-ended feeling to the movement's end. The clarinet's final three notes (E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –C) form an audible link into the main theme of the second movement and therefore invite an *attacca* performance.

To take this interpretation one step further: many authors have described an autumnal or nostalgic quality in Brahms's late works,¹¹ and his final compositions may be interpreted as expressions of *Todesangst*, a sentiment that, for Brahms, entailed consciousness of both his own mortality and that of the "classical" tradition that he represented.¹² Themes of mortality and redemption are explicitly referenced in Brahms's final two compositions—the Four Serious Songs of op. 121 (Brahms morbidly joked that he wrote these as a present to himself on what proved to be his final birthday)¹³ and the posthumous Organ Preludes of op. 122, a collection that culminates with "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen" and that includes two settings of the Matthew Passion chorale. While the sonata op. 120, no. 1 contains no such explicit reference to *Todesangst*, themes of mortality may be suggested by the journey from the first movement's intense struggle to the finale's affirmative celebration of life. In the wake of the weighty opening movement, the slow movement stands as an inward reflection that explores some of the same motives but, one might say, comes at them from a different psychological place—or, more technically, places them in a different tonal context.

After the A section finds its close, we arrive at the movement's innermost sanctuary, the B section, in which the piano's harp-like figuration may evoke a vision of heaven, an impression

¹¹ See, for example, Notley 2006.

¹² Brahms's preoccupation with mortality was surely heightened by the many losses he suffered in the years preceding the composition of op. 120. His *Todesangst* is a focal point in many accounts of this period written by Brahms's friends and acquaintances.

¹³ Brahms's description of op. 121 as a birthday present is transmitted in Hanslick 1990 [1899], 177. See also Widmann 1898, 119–21.

that is augmented by the whole-tone elements and by the modulation to the otherworldly $\flat$ VI. As the B section begins, the first movement's characteristic F-minor tetrachord (F–E $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –C) is set in D $\flat$ major, albeit with a doleful tinge of minor as D $\flat$ resolves to C. But as the passage repeats beginning in m. 31, and D $\flat$ is freed of its desire—of its *Tonwille*—to resolve down to C. It is thus allowed to let go of *Diatonie*, to drift gently down the whole-tone scale.¹⁴ At precisely this moment, as the major-thirds cycle begins (m. 41), the piano is untethered from its normal *tessitura* and floats up to its highest register, while the clarinet stays below, again suggesting a glimpse of heaven, as viewed from earth. This image accords wonderfully with the “suspension of tonal gravity” that Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter hear in such equal-intervallic cycles.¹⁵

The notion of half-steps representing life's burdensome desires and obligations—with which the first movement struggles and from which the second movement's B section is released—is underscored in the movement's coda (m. 71ff, excerpted in Ex. 8), which reprises the B-section material but with a newfound Mixolydian “flavor,” free of the onerous half-steps and their attendant desires and obligations. This leading-tone-free music in mm. 71–74 stands in sharp contrast with the leading-tone-laden harmony in m. 77. If Brahms's music calls upon analysts to reconcile contradictions and paradoxes, here we find one pair of opposites that

¹⁴ The notion of half-step resolutions representing life's burdensome desires and obligations was suggested to me by Carl Schachter in connection with his unpublished analysis of Brahms's song “Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht,” Op. 96, No. 1.

¹⁵ Salzer and Schachter 1969, 215.

Brahms has reconciled for us: the great cosmic duo of life and death, which coexist so peacefully within this movement.

B-material (mixolydian version)

The musical score for Example 8, measures 69-81, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 69-72) shows the clarinet part with dynamics *p*, *dim.*, and *pp*, and the piano accompaniment with dynamics *p* and *pp*. The second system (measures 73-81) continues the piano accompaniment with dynamics *f* and *pp*, and the clarinet part with dynamics *pp* and *dim.*. The piano part features a complex bass line with repeated notes and chords, while the clarinet part has a melodic line with some grace notes. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

EXAMPLE 8. Score (movement 2, mm. 69–81)

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