

Examining the Influence of Romantic Era Style on Classical Form in Johannes Brahms'
Piano Compositions

To what extent did Johannes Brahms adapt sonata form, scherzo, and rondo forms to romantic era style in his *Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5*?

Amy Pham

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Examining the Influence of Romantic Era Style on Classical Form in Johannes Brahms' Piano Compositions

Johannes Brahms was a romantic-era composer who adapted classical forms to the style of the romantic era in his compositions. This set him apart from other romantic-era composers who endeavoured to innovate new forms instead of making innovations within existing frameworks like Brahms did (Swafford, 1997). Many attempted to discourage Brahms from keeping to old traditions yet he would disregard their advice, following his own path. His dedication to and mastery of classical form was inspired by his piano instructor Eduard Marxen who made sure Brahms was thoroughly educated in them (Swafford, 1997). The public began to recognize Brahms's unique talent for combining these forms with romantic-era styles, and it led Brahms to become one of the most performed composers of the romantic-era.

This paper will analyze Brahms' Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 as an example of how he combined classical form with romantic style. Much scholarly research has supported that this piece strongly demonstrates Brahms' skills in adapting these forms—specifically sonata form, scherzo, and rondo form—to the emotional styles of the romantic era. Therefore, this piece will be suitable to study Brahms's unique technique.

Investigation and Methodology

The classical forms that will be identified in Brahms' Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 are the sonata form, scherzo, and rondo form found in the first, third, and final movement. The second and fourth movements fully embody romantic style and are irrelevant to the research question: "How did Johannes Brahms adapt the sonata form, scherzo and rondo form in his Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 to the styles of the romantic era?"

The research in this essay will come from a personal analysis of the sonata using primary sources including the first edition score¹ of the piece hosted online by the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP). This platform allows access to real, original scores like the one chosen for this analysis (Rosen, 2011). An audio recording of Wilhelm Kempff's 1969 performance of the piece² will accompany the analysis to help aurally identify elements of the sonata. Each figure will provide timestamps from this recording. Secondary sources include academic journals and books that provide background analysis to Brahms and his music such as Jan Swafford's "Johannes Brahms: A Biography."

¹ Brahms, J. (1854). *Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5* [Sheet music]. Bartholf Senff. IMSLP. <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ImagefromIndex/22820/pnbanes> See Appendix for full annotated score.

² PianoJFAudioSheet. (9 February 2021). *Brahms - Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 (Audio+Sheet) [Kempff]* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/TUP2kP4tUOM?si=vxgkEwaMK6eOhNHu>

Background

Classical Era Forms

Ernest Newman defined the classical era as the period of popular western music from 1735-1820 (as cited in Churgin, 1982). Classical form is the umbrella term for musical structures commonly shown in the pieces of this era such as the sonata form, scherzo, and rondo form.

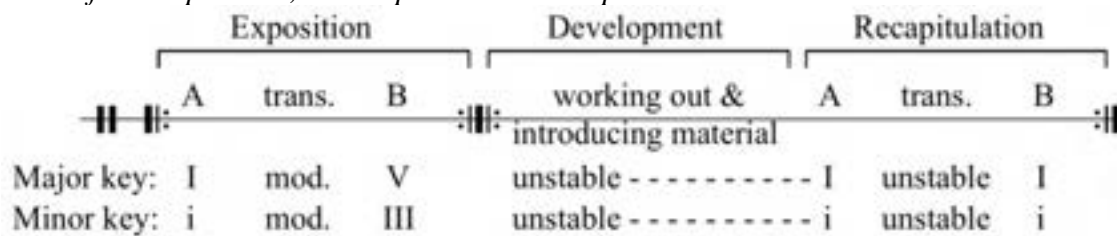
Sonata form

Sonata form is typically used for the first movement of a sonata, symphony or string quartet which are common musical genres during the classical era. It consists of three parts: the exposition, development and recapitulation as seen in figure 1 (Jacobson, 2024).

A sonata form has two contrasting themes in the exposition with a transition theme to bridge the two together. The first theme or theme group is in the tonic key and typically the transition theme modulates to the dominant or relative major key if the tonic is minor. The second theme or theme group of the exposition is in this new key. The development section explores variations of the introduced themes in different keys, working out material from the exposition. The recapitulation repeats exposition themes, reworking the transition to stay in the tonic. As a result, the second theme and the piece itself ends on the tonic. Composers may also add introductory or coda (ending) sections.

Figure 1

Depiction of the Exposition, Development and Recapitulation Sections in Sonata Form



Note. From *Tonal Harmony* (3rd ed., p. 346), by Benjamin et al., 2003, Thomson Schirmer.

ISBN 0495500542.

Scherzo

A scherzo is commonly alight, energetic, dance-like musical structure frequently found in the third movement of a symphony, sonata, or string quartet. It is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time and includes elements of surprise in dynamics and orchestration. The scherzo structure in the classical era is simple ternary form, containing an ABA format where B represents a contrasting section called the trio.

Rondo Form

Similar to a sonata, a rondo incorporates different sections. It begins with a main section referred to as A, which then alternates with contrasting episodes referred to as B, C, etc. (Jarvis, 2023). Section A is repeated with abbreviations or embellishments but always remains in the same tonic key. Rondo form may be formatted as ABACA.

The Romantic Era

The Romantic era is defined by a more emotionally expressive approach to composing that developed around the years 1830 to 1890 (Dunnet, 2024). Composers rejected the structural restraints of the classical era, and expanded their use of metric and tonal variations. Elements that show metric development in romantic era pieces are syncopation, where notes are played offbeat; and irregular groupings, where grouped notes are momentarily played in a different time signature. Chromaticism, where notes outside the tonic key are used, and harmonic ambiguity are other romantic era elements that expand on tonality.

Some other compositional elements that were common in the romantic style are: common tone modulations, false starts for returning sections, finishing a piece that was in a minor key on the tonic major to signal a story from dark to light and using previous material in new sections.

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5

Brahms's Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 was composed in 1853 when he was only 19 during his career breakthrough (Musgrave, 2001). It displays his masterful ability to take the rigid structures of classical forms and add the chromaticism, intense dynamics, and emotional depth of the romantic era to those forms. This sonata is also his largest piano composition and one well-known for its difficulty. Described by music critic Malcolm McDonald (as cited in DuBose, 2009), as "one of the three greatest piano sonatas of the mid-nineteenth century," this piece was a crucial step for Brahms career.

Much reliable scholarship supports that this piece offers profound exploration of Brahms' skills in adapting classical forms—specifically sonata form, scherzo, and rondo form—to the emotional styles of the romantic era. These reasons support why the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 will be a suitable piece to analyze Brahms' romantic innovations with classical era forms.

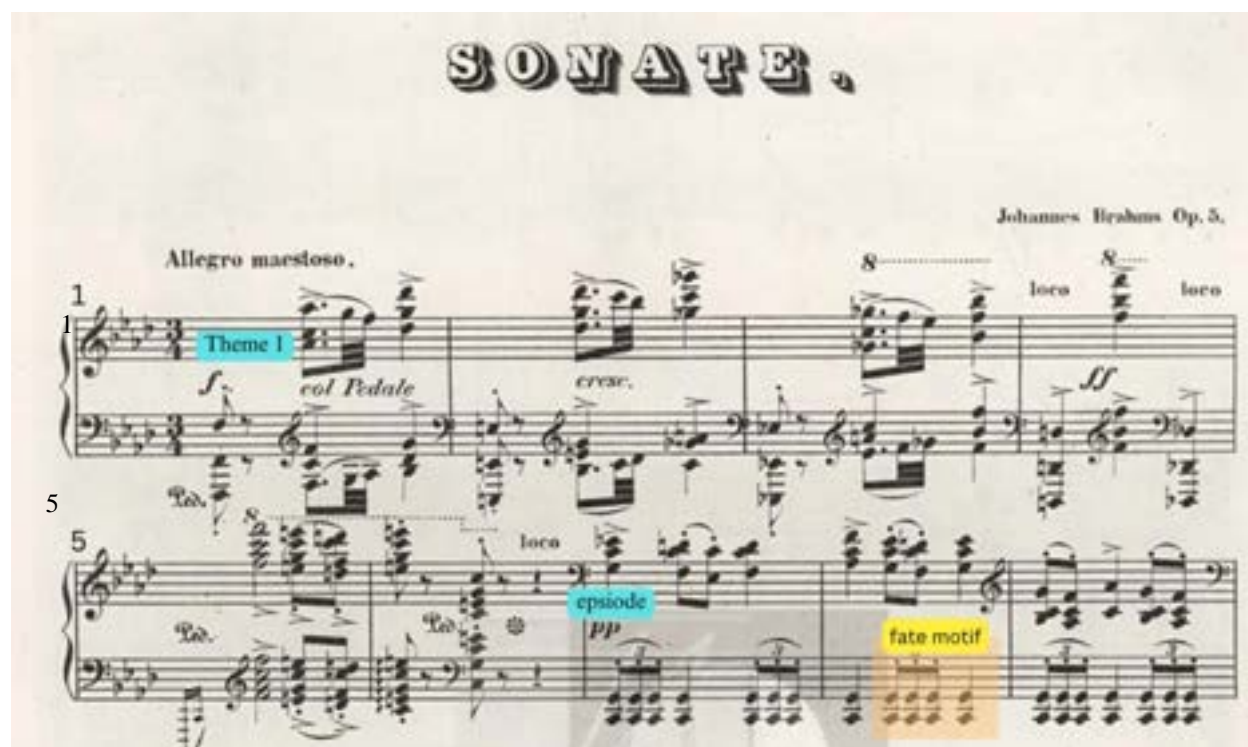
Research Analysis

Movement 1: Sonata Form

Exposition

Figure 2

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Measures 1-9, 0:00-0:19 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

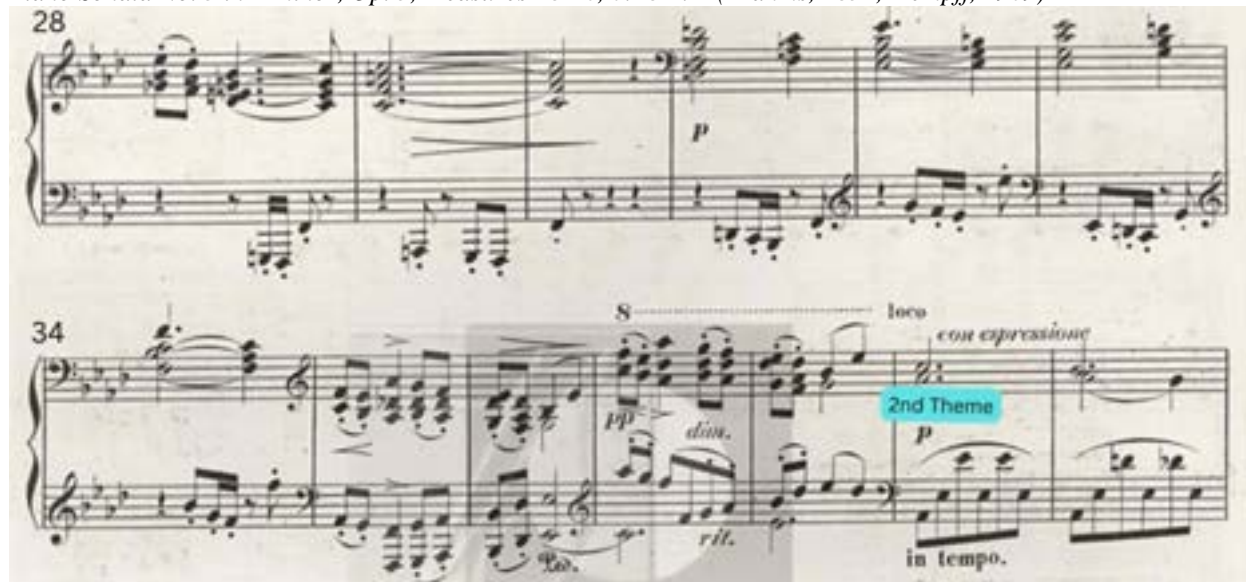


The exposition begins in the tonic key of F minor. In measure 1 the first theme, introduces a motif where a descending long-short-short rhythm with contrary motion between the hands ends with a loud chord on the third beat. This motif repeats in ascending harmonic shifts. In measure 7, a slow, mysterious episode begins in c minor accompanied by a left-hand triplet rhythm similar to Beethoven's "fate" motif from Symphony No. 5 (McNaughton, 2021). It is played in the dominant minor which was uncommon and sounds like the transition to theme 2. However, jagged octaves lead listeners into a repeat of theme 1 in measure 17, where the right hand replies to the left hand, both in parallel motion.

Common tone modulation was a hallmark of Romantic era style and Brahms used it directly modulate from the C major chord at the end of theme 1 to the key to A-flat major, which begins the real transition comprised of a mixture of material from theme 1 and the ensuing fate motif episode.

Figure 3

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Measures 28-46, 0:48-1:21 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Theme 2 begins in measure 39, featuring wide left-hand arpeggios and a soft, fairy-tale-like melody in the right hand. An intense crescendo climaxes in measure 53. Brahms uses chromaticism (Figure 4) to lead to a repeat of the theme that ends in measure 71 on D-flat major, when the exposition should end in A flat major, the key in which it started.

Figure 4

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 Measures 53-58, 1:43-1:51 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



The jagged octaves return to modulate back to F minor for a repeat of the exposition. After the repeat, the jagged octaves now use common tone modulation to modulate to C-sharp minor, the tonic minor of D-flat major which ended theme 2.

Figure 5

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 Measures 64-79, 2:02-2:13/ 4:20-4:28 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

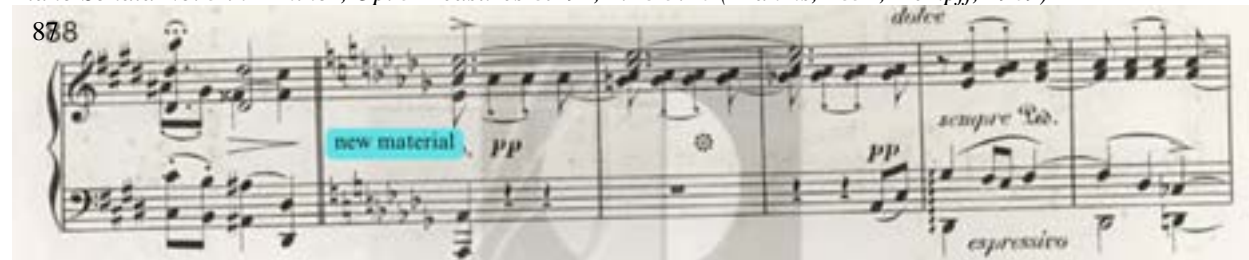


Development

The development, from measures 72-37, shifts to 4/4 (measures 72-73) and 5/4 time (measure 74), creating a sense of rhythmic disorientation. The exposition's material is worked out in different keys. Unusually, new material is introduced in D-flat major in measure 88, featuring a syncopated rhythm in and modal mixture in D-flat major minor (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 Measures 87-92, 4:48-5:10 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



It sounds like the recapitulation begins in measure 124 but it is still the development working out material from the exposition. Brahms even combines the fate motif from the episode with chord progressions of theme 1 in measures 130-142.

Recapitulation

The recapitulation repeats similarly to the exposition though the first theme is shorter as the first statement of theme 1 and the episode and are removed. The transition begins immediately in F major, which is also the key of theme 2. Brahms then includes a lengthy coda with three parts to secure the F major ending. He brings back all the material he introduced throughout the sonata form such as the syncopated rhythms and fate motif. This movement ends with four grand F major chords spanning over six bars which create a dramatic, orchestral effect (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Coda, Measures 206-222, 8:43-8:55 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Evaluation of Brahms' Sonata Form

In this sonata, Brahms follows typical sonata form structure with an exposition that has a first theme, a transition to the relative major key, and a second theme in the new key.

Afterwards, there is a development section where the material is worked out. A recapitulation section repeats the first theme and second theme.

There are also subversive romantic style elements that such as chromaticism and contrasting dynamics which increase the movement's dramatic effect. Brahms also changes the time signature from 3/4 to 4/4, 5/4, and 6/4, and uses syncopation adding complex metric variety. He uses common-tone modulations and false starts to following sections too. Brahms ends the movement in F major instead of the minor tonic, symbolizing a shift from darkness to light. Last, he mixes introduced material to make different sections.

Brahms uses these romantic style complexities to create varying dramatic expressions for each passage. Theme 1's energetic character contrasts with the mysteriousness of the episode. Their tension contrast theme 2's dreamy quality. The development introduces new, extra syncopated material to add a contrasting eerie and unstable feeling to the piece. Then, the recapitulation conquers the darkness of the beginning, mirroring the emotional arc of the Romantic style. In summary, Brahms skilfully blends romantic and classical era elements in the Sonata's first movement.

Movement 3: Scherzo

Scherzo

Figure 8

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 1-11, 19:20-19:32 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

The image displays a page from a musical score for the Scherzo movement of Brahms' Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5. The page is numbered '20' in the top left corner. The title 'SCHERZO.' is centered at the top. The tempo marking 'Allegro energico.' is written above the first staff. The score is in 3/4 time. The first system shows measures 1 through 5, with measure 1 labeled 'theme 1A' and measure 8 labeled 'repeat'. The second system shows measures 6 through 11. The score is written for piano and features a distinctive long-short rhythm and dissonant arpeggio figures.

This scherzo, which spans measures 1-100, is characterized by a distinctive long-short rhythm, interrupted by rests, and introduces a lively energy, and destabilizing harmonic ambiguity. The first theme (1A) opens the movement with an ascending dissonant arpeggio figure. Theme 1A repeats in measure 8 before a softer passage (measures 14–16) transitions to theme 1B (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 12-26, 19:32-19:44 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Theme 1B begins in measure 17 and resembles theme 1A with the left hand playing the thematic rhythm, creating a march like feel. Theme 1B repeats.

Figure 10

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 34-26, 19:51-19:57 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Theme 2 begins in measure 36 with descending right-hand arpeggios and slow long-short rhythms in the left as seen in figure 10. A crescendo intensifies this playful theme and a diminuendo returns the feeling of mystery (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 48-59, 20:04-20:12 (Brahms, 1854)



An offbeat short-long half-step episode (measure 66-69) build anticipation as it transitions to an altered repeat of theme 1A (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 66-7, 20:18-20:27 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Repeated staccato F minor plagal cadences (figure 13) and two silent measures signify the scherzo's end.

Figure 13

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 86-106, 20:33-20:51 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

86

96

F minor plagal cadences

Trio. Legato

2

Fine.

p

Trio

The trio (measures 101-210) sharply contrast the scherzo. Its theme features a slow, warm, arching legato melody (figure 14) that is repeated. This theme was also in the second and fourth movement. A dark episode follows, incorporating the fate motive in the left hand (figure 14). This section repeats.

Figure 14

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 118-127, 20:59-21:09 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

117

cresc.

f

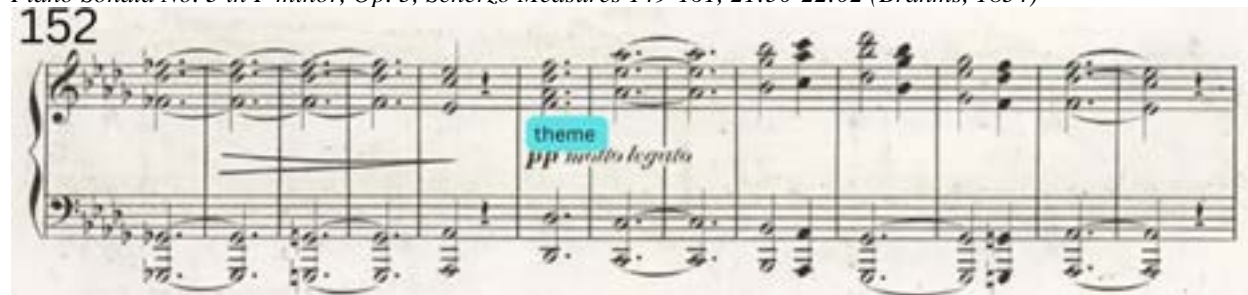
dim.

fate motive

Next, an eerie variation of the theme is presented in E-flat minor. The half-cadence ending is replayed thrice, creating an unsettling feeling.

Figure 15

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 149-161, 21:50-22:02 (Brahms, 1854)



In measure 157, the theme reappears and leads into a crescendo. The climax of octaves rings with an arching motion (figure 16). The crescendo continues in chromatic motion until measure 201. The transition of arpeggios (measure 203) hints at the returning scherzo, which repeats verbatim.

Figure 16

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Scherzo Measures 174-201, 22:11-22:28 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

Evaluation of Brahms' Scherzo

Brahms fulfills all typical characteristics of a scherzo in this movement: it is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time and has an energetic theme. There is a clear ternary ABA format including a distinguishable trio section.

However, Brahms also expands the form, adapting it with romantic era complexity and intensity. Brahms writes intricate chromatic progressions and bold modulations from the dark C minor scherzo to the lyrically bright D-flat major trio. The diminished chords and abundance of octaves evoke the stormy grandeur of an orchestra, adding romantic-style dramatic weight. Brahms expands the usual scherzo trio form by adding an episode. This episode incorporates the fate motive. The trio also uses material from movement two.

Overall, Brahms improves the traditional scherzo by adding complex layers of emotion and drama, akin to the romantic style.

Finale: Rondo Form

Main Section (A)

This movement begins with a dark, galloping F minor theme. Syncopated responses characterized by a long-short swing and a clipped dotted rhythm are merged with the theme. This call and response material repeats with variations in pianissimo and forte (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 1-12, 27:13-27:32 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



In measure 25, a transition of fast, jagged descending arpeggios in the right hand begins and repeats (figure 18). It slows and becomes softer, and the left hand plays descending octaves in the syncopated rhythm (measure 33-38). Suddenly, it modulates to F-major leading into the first episode.

Figure 18

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 27-35, 27:53-28:06 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



First Episode (B)

From measures 39-70 a long, beautiful theme is played in F-major with murmuring thirds in the left hand. The melody is repeated twice on different notes. The last repeat is extended with an arching rhythm in measure 63 (Figure 19).

Figure 19

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 58-67, 28:32-28:46 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

Figure 19 displays a musical score for the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale, measures 58-67. The score is written for piano and features a melody in the right hand, often consisting of eighth and sixteenth notes. The left hand provides a murmuring accompaniment of thirds. The key signature changes to F major (two flats) in measure 58. The score includes dynamic markings such as *molte*, *dim.*, and *poco f*. A yellow box highlights the word "extension" in measure 63. The measures are numbered 58 and 62.

Re-transition

Rapid arching figures move the material back to the minor key. The main galloping theme is repeated consistently in high notes with varying bass octaves from measures 78-100 in pianissimo, creating an unsettling feeling (Figure 20). In measure 103, the re-transition ends and the main section (A) begins but it is subdued in ethereal chords in the piano's high register.

Figure 20

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 74-84, 29:00-29:13 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Second Episode (C)

A new theme in D-flat major consists of a melody with four descending chords played in three waves that ends on a rounding figure (Figure 21). The long beats, legato chorale texture and pianissimo nature of the melody add to its feeling of royalty. It is repeated (Figure 21). The descending A-flat-G-F gesture mirrors the same gesture hidden at the opening of the first movement.

Figure 21

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 140-157, 30:30-30:55 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

140
141
section C
pp legato sempre
repeat
mf
151
150

Then in measure 165, the theme repeats as a canon –the right hand copying after the left hand (Figure 22).

Figure 22

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 159-175, 31:03-31:13 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)

159
pian f
repeat
theme
mf
168

Re-transition

In measure 176, the right hand plays dissonant diminished and dominant triads while the left-hand plays ostinato figures resembling the fate motive (Figure 23).

Figure 23

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 176-181, 31:17-31:25 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Main Section (A)

The galloping theme returns in measure 195. It is repeated as a canon in measure 199. Notes from section C reappear, creating a short phrase. A new variation of the theme is played in measure 209. Its ending phrase is chromatic. Then the theme's syncopated response is repeated but the chromaticism is replaced with an expansion and diversion that is less intense. Jagged arpeggios reappear in measure 226 which become increasingly challenging. (Figure 24).

Figure 24

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 218-220, 32:30-32:34 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



The movement reaches F major in measure 236. Now it is in quadruplets. A dissonant C-sharp ends the irregular grouping. In measure 242, there is conflict between the keys until F major conquers again. The right-hand ascends near the highest point on the piano, before dramatically plunging downwards in measure 248 to introduce the coda (Figure 25).

Figure 25

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 242-252, 32:46-32:56 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Coda

Similar to the ending of the first movement, Brahms adds a lengthy difficult coda with three sections. It begins *piu mosso* (faster) and increases in tempo. In the first coda, the left-hand accompaniment repeats the descending three note gesture, A-G-F, quickly while the right hand plays it slower (the A flat is changed to A to reflect the new major mode of F major). This showcases Brahms' composing talent (Figure 26).

Figure 26

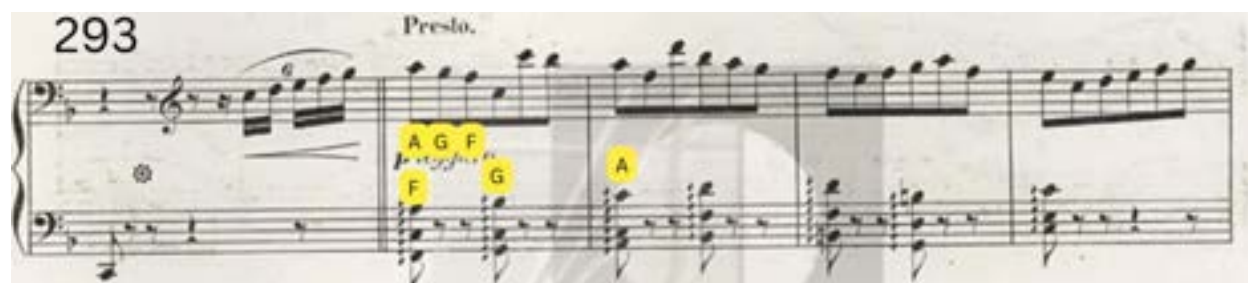
Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 253-258, 32:56-33:02 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



The second coda is a wild presto (very fast phrase) with scale figures. The A-G-F notes from section C reappear in measure 293, the right hand playing it faster and the left playing an inverted F-G-A gesture at the base of its chords more slowly. (Figure 27).

Figure 27

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 293-297, 33:29-33:33 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



The main galloping theme and fate motif reappears in the third coda. The piece then ends with five dramatic F major chords spanning 6 bars, similar to the ending of the first movement (Figure 28).

Figure 28

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, Finale Measures 358-366, 34:21-34:33 (Brahms, 1854; Kempff, 1969)



Evaluation of Brahms' Rondo

Brahms' rondo has a main section and two episodes, following typical ABACA structure. However, before each return to the main section, Brahms incorporated re-transition sections instead of direct returns. The coda is also overly extensive and complex for a rondo, balancing the extended main material before it. With these extra elements, Brahms builds dramatic suspense.

Brahms also uses chromaticism, syncopation, and irregular rhythmic groupings. He also changes the A section key from F minor to A-flat major where it would usually stay in the same key, and incorporates themes from section C within section A. Each theme is also more diverse, developed, and expressive than a typical rondo: with an ominous galloping theme in section A, a heartfelt theme in episode B and a theme of royalty in section C. The emotional intensity in these sections differ from the simple rondo themes of the classical era.

Overall, Brahms touches makes more superficial use of classical structure in this movement, adding more romantic era elements to create an impactful finale for his sonata.

Conclusion

An analysis of Brahms' Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 5, effectively identifies his unique compositional characteristics.. Specifically, an analysis of the first movement, third movement and finale, finds that references to the sonata form, scherzo and rondo forms typical of the classical era have been injected with clear romantic era stylistic elements.

Notable romantic style elements that Brahms displays in the movements are chromaticism, syncopation, harmonic ambiguity, and common tone modulations. He also begins the piece in the F minor key but ends in F major, creating a story where dark conquers light.

Most significantly, he develops new material using previous material throughout the whole piece. For example, the trio and fourth movement incorporates material from the second movement. The fate motive is also repeated throughout the piece in different ways. Lastly, he uses the first three notes of the piece A-flat-G-F to create varying rhythms throughout section C of the finale and its coda, uniting the ending with the beginning. While fulfilling characteristics for each classical form, Brahms shows mastery of these romantic era compositional elements.

However, the extent to which Johannes Brahms adapted each form to romantic era style varies. The third movement remains the most similar to typical scherzo form. Then, the sonata form in the first movement incorporates more romantic era elements, varying from the usual structure slightly more. The finale's has romantic style elements to a large extent within the rondo form—there is a main section and episodes but also uncommon transition sections and extensive codas among other elements, creating dramatic suspense.

Future papers may evaluate more pieces by Brahms as only one piece by him was analyzed in this paper, which was also a piece composed early in his career. However, scholars agree that this piece exemplifies Brahms' style and laid the foundation of his compositional

practice that would develop over the span of his career. Thus, this analysis of the Piano Sonata No. 3 Op. 5 asserts that it is exemplary of how Brahms adapts classical era compositional forms with romantic elements while maintaining most of the traditional form's characteristics.

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Appendix

Link to fully annotated score on Canva: https://www.canva.com/design/DAGW-R-wz38/OzUd-KJRhbIaexpf3v3-ew/edit?utm_content=DAGW-R-wz38&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton