

Research Article

An Analytical Study of Brahms's Piano Style: Focusing on the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5

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Abstract

This study investigates the piano style of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), a prominent German composer of the nineteenth century, through an analysis of his Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, one of the most representative works from his early compositional period. The research aims to explore the formal structure, thematic development, harmonic language, rhythmic characteristics, and textural writing of the sonata, revealing Brahms's integration of Classical compositional principles with Romantic expressivity. The study adopts multiple research methods, including musical analysis, which examines motivic development, rhythmic organization, and pianistic texture. In addition, the study incorporates polyphonic analysis to understand how Brahms weaves multiple independent lines, a version comparison method to examine differences in early drafts or editions, and harmonic analysis to highlight chord progressions and tonal centers. Furthermore, a comparison of these methods helps uncover the structural unity of the sonata. Performance considerations, such as voicing, articulation, and tempo flexibility, are also analyzed to provide practical guidance for performers. The findings suggest that Piano Sonata No. 3 not only demonstrates Brahms's remarkable compositional maturity at an early age but also foreshadows key stylistic features of his later works, offering valuable insights for both music scholars and performers.

Keywords

Johannes Brahms, Piano Sonata No.3 in F Minor, Brahms's Piano Style, Structural Analysis, Harmonic Language, Romantic Music

1. Introduction

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) stands as one of the most significant composers of the Romantic era, whose piano works embody a profound synthesis of Classical structural discipline and Romantic expressive depth. Among his extensive contributions to the piano repertoire, the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, occupies a particularly important position. Composed in 1853 when Brahms was only twenty, this monumental work reflects both his youthful ambition and his deep engagement with the musical traditions of Beethoven and

Schumann. At the same time, it reveals an emerging individuality marked by rich harmonic language, rhythmic complexity, and a strong sense of narrative continuity.

This study aims to explore Brahms's distinctive piano style through a detailed analysis of the Piano Sonata No. 3. By examining its formal design, thematic development, and pianistic textures, the paper seeks to illuminate how Brahms negotiates the balance between tradition and innovation. Special attention will be given to his use of motivic transformation,

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dense contrapuntal writing, and expressive contrasts, which together contribute to the sonata's structural coherence and emotional intensity.

Through this focused analysis, the research not only highlights the artistic significance of this early masterpiece but also provides insight into the broader characteristics of Brahms's piano writing. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Piano Sonata No. 3 serves as a crucial key to understanding Brahms's compositional voice and his enduring contribution to the evolution of Romantic piano music.

2. Historical Context and Stylistic Evolution of Johannes Brahms's Piano Works

Brahms's music demonstrates a deep respect for classical forms while simultaneously embracing Romantic expressiveness. Over the course of his career, his piano style evolved from youthful, structurally ambitious compositions to more introspective and refined late works. This evolution is evident in his treatment of harmony, texture, and form, revealing a composer who continuously balanced tradition with innovation.

2.1. The Emergence of Piano Music in the 19th Century

The 19th century represents a significant period in the development of piano literature. During this era, many master composers produced an extraordinary number of piano works, including Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt. Unlike earlier Classical composers such as Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven—who focused more on symphonies and chamber music—many Romantic composers devoted themselves extensively to piano composition.

Several factors contributed to the rising popularity of the piano in the 19th century. First, changes in social structure, particularly the growth of the middle class, enabled more people to appreciate music and own pianos. Second, the spread of individualism and the spirit of freedom following the French Revolution encouraged composers to explore personal expression, leading to the creation of numerous short character pieces rather than strictly formal works. Finally, significant technological advancements in piano construction expanded the instrument's range and dynamic capabilities, further enhancing its expressive potential.

Compared to Schuman, Chopin, and Liszt, Brahms wrote relatively little for piano solo. Although he too was a pianist, only a seemingly meager part of his total output is devoted to the piano (out of a total of 122 opus-numbers, only 15 are for piano solo) [1]. However, unlike Liszt or Mendelssohn, the quality of every Brahms piano works is very even. Most of his

piano works are well-written and are remained in the important part of piano literature. Another significant difference between Brahms and his contemporaries, is that he sought inspiration from models of previous generation of composers such as Beethoven. For example, many think that the main theme of his 1st piano sonata (the dotted striking rhythm) is the direct quote from Beethoven piano sonata Op. 106 [2].

2.2. Stylistic Development from Early to Late Periods

Brahms began by writing large works in traditional structure that were at once direct descendants from late Beethoven and, by the same token, among Brahms's most obvious attempts to emulate the large orchestral canvas of the late 19th century. The early sonatas (he has 3 sonatas op 1, 2, and 5, all composed between 1851 -53) and the Op. 4 Scherzo (1851) are huge, imposing works, the pianistic equivalents of the Bruckner or Mahler symphonies [3]. Later in his life, his interest in formal sets of variations for solo piano stands virtually alone at this point in history. He wrote six sets of variations, including themes by Handel, Schumann, Paganini...., for solo piano from 1854 to 1863. These middle-period sets of variations and early-period sonatas are examples of some of the most difficult technical writing to be encountered anywhere in the literature.

Toward middle to late of the life, as his musical thinking evolved, he moved away from the larger forms, embrace the nineteenth-century character piece, and conceive pieces in which virtuoso elements were downplayed even more and traditional, disciplined techniques of composition became increasingly evident. Unlike Schumann, Brahms used very few literary references, and he eschewed the use of programmatic or descriptive titles other than the general moods implied by such designation as Rhapsody, Capriccio, Intermezzo, Romance. The musical mood of intermezzo tends to be slow and quiet piece and rhapsodies more passionate and rhetorical. From the year of 1878-81, he composed piano pieces Op. 76 (8 pieces) and the famous two Rhapsodies Op. 79. For his very late compositions (1892-93), a few character pieces were collected together under one Opus number, such as Op. 116 (7 pieces), Op. 117 (3), Op. 118 (6), and Op. 119 (4). It does not suggest that these pieces under one opus number should be performed in its entirety. However, most of the pianists would tend to perform the whole set on stage [4].

2.3. Harmonic Language and Pianistic Characteristics

Johannes Brahms's compositional style is characterized by a preference for harmonic movement based on root progressions by fourths and fifths, rather than the chromatic, stepwise harmonic shifts favored by Franz Liszt. In addition, contrapuntal writing constitutes a fundamental element of Brahms's musical language and is prominently evident throughout his

piano works, reflecting both his deep respect for earlier traditions and his mastery of complex textures.

From a pianistic perspective, Brahms's writing presents distinct challenges. Unlike the idiomatic and hand-friendly keyboard style of Frédéric Chopin, Brahms often prioritizes dense harmonic textures and intricate voicing over physical comfort. His music frequently requires wide hand stretches, rapid redistribution of material between the hands, and constant movement across the keyboard, all of which contribute to its technical difficulty. As Clara Schumann famously remarked, "his things are very difficult," a statement that has been widely acknowledged by performers who have encountered the more awkward aspects of Brahms's piano writing [5].

Nevertheless, despite its considerable technical demands, Brahms's keyboard music does not seek virtuosity for its own sake. Instead, it embodies a profound musical sophistication in which technical complexity serves expressive and structural purposes. The difficulty lies not merely in physical execution, but in the performer's ability to project the inner voices, balance dense textures, and convey the underlying musical logic, thereby revealing an artistry that resides beyond mere surface display.

3. A Structure Analysis of Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 5 in F Minor, 1853

Composed in 1853, the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, is a monumental five-movement work that stands as the crowning achievement of Johannes Brahms's early career. Although written within months of his first two sonatas, this piece demonstrates a far more sophisticated structural command and a remarkable orchestral breadth. Brahms successfully captures a sense of dramatic intensity and deep Romantic lyricism, eschewing the technical "pianistic awkwardness" that performers often encounter in his earlier Op. 1 and Op. 2 sonatas.

The year of its composition was a turning point for the twenty-year-old composer. While on tour with the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi, Brahms visited Weimar and heard Franz Liszt perform his own B-minor Sonata. This encounter left a clear mark on Op. 5; notably, the opening motif of the first movement undergoes a gradual "thematic transformation" that strongly recalls Liszt's innovative style [6].

Beyond its technical brilliance, the sonata is famous for its poetic soul—particularly the second movement, which was inspired by the verses of Sternau (German poet Otto Julius Inckermann, 1823-1862). This blend of symphonic power and intimate poetry eventually led Robert Schumann to hail Brahms as the musical heir to Beethoven [7]. By the time the sonata was completed, it was clear that Brahms had moved beyond the role of a student, emerging instead as a mature architect of the Romantic era.

3.1. First Movement (Allegro Maestoso)

The first movement of Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op.

5 presents an expanded and structurally sophisticated realization of sonata form. Marked *Allegro Maestoso*, the movement integrates Classical formal principles with Romantic expressive depth, resulting in a large-scale and symphonically conceived design. While maintaining the conventional tripartite structure of exposition, development, and recapitulation, Brahms significantly enlarges each section through dense textures and continuous motivic transformation.

3.1.1. Exposition

The exposition opens with a powerful first theme in F minor, characterized by rhythmic drive, wide intervallic gestures, and chordal density. Rather than relying on extended lyrical melodies, Brahms constructs his material from concise motivic cells, a technique strongly associated with Ludwig van Beethoven. The transition section develops these motives sequentially, modulating toward the relative major. The second theme, presented in A-flat major, offers a more lyrical character; however, its expressive quality remains harmonically rich and texturally complex. In contrast to the clearer thematic dualism found in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Brahms preserves a sense of continuity through active inner voices and polyphonic writing. The closing section reinforces the new key while maintaining motivic unity.

3.1.2. Development

The development section is extensive and characterized by fragmentation and recombination of thematic material. Brahms explores multiple tonal regions, often through sequential processes, generating heightened tension and instability. Contrapuntal techniques play a central role, demonstrating both structural rigor and expressive intensity.

3.1.3. Recapitulation

In the recapitulation, the primary theme returns in the tonic key with increased weight. The transition is recomposed to avoid modulation, while the second theme reappears in the tonic domain, often colored by tonal ambiguity between major and minor. The movement concludes with an extended coda that functions as a secondary development, culminating in a forceful affirmation of F major.

Overall, the movement exemplifies Brahms's ability to achieve structural coherence through motivic economy and contrapuntal complexity, reflecting the enduring influence of Beethoven while articulating a distinctly Romantic musical language.

3.2. Second Movement (Andante: Andante Espressivo)

The second movement (*Andante Espressivo*) of Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 provides a lyrical and introspective contrast to the dramatic character of the first movement.

Cast in a broadly ternary (A-B-A') form followed by an extended coda, the movement reflects the aesthetics of the Romantic character pieces while maintaining a high degree of structural cohesion. The presence of a poetic epigraph suggests an underlying programmatic dimension, in which musical expression is closely aligned with poetic imagery.

The great warmth of expression in the *andante*, the second movement, had been presaged in the first movement's gentler contrasts. Three lines of C. O. Sternau (Otto Julius Inkermann Sternau)'s poetry, dealing with the evening, moonlight, and lovers united, appear at the opening of the second movement [8].

“Der Abend dammert, das Mondlicht scheint (Evening fall, and moonlight shines)

da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe vereint (there, two hearts united in love)

und halten sich selig umfassen” (hold each other in blissful embrace)

3.2.1. A Section

The opening section (A), set in A-flat major, unfolds in a highly cantabile style. The principal melody is lyrical and expansive, supported by a flowing arpeggiated accompaniment that creates a sense of continuity and warmth. Rather than conforming strictly to regular phrase structures, the thematic material is shaped through flexible, asymmetrical phrasing and subtle variation. Chromatic inflections and expressive dissonances, such as appoggiaturas, enrich the harmonic language, while the melodic line is often embedded within inner voices, contributing to a refined and layered texture.

3.2.2. B Section

The middle section (B) introduces a contrasting expressive domain through both tonal and textural transformation. Moving away from the stability of A-flat major, the music explores more remote harmonic regions, accompanied by increased chromaticism and dynamic intensity. The texture becomes denser and more agitated, with a heightened sense of rhythmic motion and contrapuntal interaction. Despite this contrast, the material remains motivically connected to the opening section, as earlier ideas are transformed and recontextualized rather than replaced.

3.2.3. A' Section

The return of the A section (A') presents a varied restatement of the initial material. While the principal theme reappears in the tonic key, it is enriched through more elaborate accompaniment and intensified harmonic coloration. Subtle rhythmic displacement and thicker textures contribute to a sense of deepened expressivity, suggesting a reflective reinterpretation of the opening idea rather than a literal repetition. The tonal center is reaffirmed, yet colored by modal mixture and nuanced voice-leading.

3.2.4. Coda

The movement concludes with an extended coda that distills the thematic material into a more intimate and subdued texture. The coda begins with a shift to D-flat Major (marked *Adagio*), after the passionate climaxes of the movement, the texture thins out into a series of hushed, chorale-like chords. This section is often interpreted as the “blessed embrace” mentioned in the final line of Sternau's poem.

Overall, the second movement demonstrates a balance between lyrical expressivity and structural integration. Its ternary design serves as a flexible framework within which Brahms develops a cohesive musical narrative, characterized by motivic continuity, harmonic richness, and textural refinement.

3.3. Third Movement (Scherzo: Allegro Energico)

The third movement (Scherzo: Allegro Energico) of Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 functions as a dynamic and rhythmically charged component within the overall sonata cycle. Adopting a compound ternary form (Scherzo–Trio–Scherzo da capo), the movement reflects the Beethovenian scherzo tradition while simultaneously expanding its expressive and textural scope. The prevailing character is one of urgency and propulsion, achieved through sharply articulated rhythms, registral contrasts, and dense chordal writing.

Brahms followed the tradition of Beethoven to use scherzo movement in the sonata composition. Unlike Chopin (in his 3 sonatas) put the Scherzo as second movement of sonata, Brahms in his 3 sonatas used Scherzo movement as third movement of the sonata. The third movement, athletic Scherzo, is regular in structure but, like the scherzo from the other sonatas, is characterized by driving energy with a texture born of octaves and massive chords in the outer sections as well as a more sustained, choral-like, lyrical trio. Instead of moving to the relative or parallel key of f minor, Brahms moved down a major third to Db for the key of the trio (Beethoven had used the third-degree relationship instead of moving to dominant key for the second theme of 1st movement of “*Waldstein*” sonata) [9].

3.3.1. Scherzo Section

The Scherzo section (A), in F minor, is driven by a highly energetic principal idea characterized by syncopation, off-beat accents, and rapid figurations. Rather than presenting a light or playful scherzo in the Classical sense, Brahms intensifies the genre through thick textures and a sense of dramatic weight. The thematic material is constructed from concise rhythmic and motivic units, which are persistently developed through repetition, sequence, and variation. The harmonic language reinforces this intensity through frequent tonic–dominant oscillations and the use of diminished harmonies, contributing to an atmosphere of tension and forward momentum.

Texturally, wide leaps and chordal passages create an orchestral effect, demanding both precision and clarity in execution.

3.3.2. Trio Section

The Trio section (B) provides a marked contrast in both key and character. Typically shifting to D-flat major, this section introduces a more lyrical and flowing texture, with smoother melodic contours and a reduction in rhythmic agitation. The accompaniment becomes more legato and less percussive, allowing for a more sustained expressive line. Despite this contrast, Brahms maintains structural unity by subtly deriving the Trio's material from elements of the Scherzo, particularly in rhythmic profile and motivic contour. The harmonic language, while more stable, retains a richness that prevents the section from becoming overly simplistic.

3.3.3. The Da Capo Return

The return of the Scherzo (A') is largely literal, following the conventional da capo structure; however, its effect is intensified through the listener's retrospective awareness of the contrasting Trio. The reappearance of the opening material restores the dramatic tension and rhythmic drive, reinforcing the movement's cyclical coherence. Minor variations in articulation, voicing, and dynamic shaping may be observed, contributing to a sense of renewed energy rather than mere repetition.

3.4. Fourth Movement (Intermezzo: Andante Molto)

The fourth movement of Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, the shortest movement among 5 designated as an Intermezzo (Rückblick), represents a sophisticated exercise in cyclic formal organization within the mid-19th-century sonata tradition. Positioned as the second slow movement in a rare five-movement arch, it functions as a psychological and structural "retrospection." By utilizing the technique of thematic metamorphosis, Brahms reinterprets the idyllic lyricism of the second movement (Andante espressivo) through a tragic, funeral-march lens, thereby unifying the work's emotional and motivic trajectory. Structurally, the movement is cast in a concise tripartite (A-B-A') design, though its internal logic is driven by motivic economy rather than mere melodic repetition.

3.4.1. A Section

The primary theme of the A section is a direct transfiguration of the "starry" theme from the second movement. By transposing the original A flat Major warmth into a somber B flat minor and replacing the flowing accompaniment with a persistent, percussive dotted ostinato, Brahms alters the affect of the motive while maintaining its genetic pitch structure. This use of a funeral-march rhythm functions as a structural anchor, grounding the movement in a state of solemn stasis.

3.4.2. B Section

The middle section introduces a degree of developmental instability, acting as a harmonic and textural contrast to the outer sections. Here, Brahms disrupts the rhythmic regularity through harmonic centrifugalism, employing rapid modulations and diminished-seventh sonorities. This section functions as a "liminal space" where the thematic memory becomes distorted and increasingly agitated. The thick, orchestral-style writing—characterized by wide-register leaps and tremolandi—suggests a symphonic density, moving the movement beyond the scope of a standard piano character piece into a more dramatic developmental role.

3.4.3. A' Section

In the final section (A') and the subsequent transition, the movement achieves its teleological purpose by reinforcing the inevitability of the tragic mood. The return of the initial theme is not a literal repetition but an intensified reaffirmation of the "motto" interval—the falling sixth—that permeates the entire sonata. The movement ends with a dissipation of harmonic energy over a low pedal point, creating a vacuum that prepares the listener for the rhythmic vitality of the Finale.

Ultimately, the structural significance of the Intermezzo lies in its role within the sonata's symmetrical architecture. By placing this "retrospection" between the Scherzo and the Finale, Brahms creates a thematic mirror, forcing the listener to confront the transformation of past materials. This cyclic approach ensures that the sonata is perceived not as a collection of disparate movements, but as a unified psychological drama where the fourth movement serves as the critical nexus between poetic memory and final resolution.

3.5. Fifth Movement (Finale: Allegro Moderato Ma Rubato)

The last movement seemed to give Brahms the most trouble, for it caused him to delay an extra two months (until late 1853) writing to the work's first publisher, B. Schuff, that the piece was ready for publication [10]. The fifth movement may be effectively interpreted through a rondo-based formal framework, in which recurring refrains are interwoven with developmental episodes. While not a strict Classical rondo, the movement approximates a sonata-rondo design, characterized by the alternation and transformation of thematic returns.

3.5.1. Main Theme (A)

The principal refrain (A), in F minor, establishes the movement's core identity through syncopated rhythms, motivic concentration, and a sense of forward drive. Unlike the stable and clearly bounded refrains of Classical rondo form, Brahms's A section is inherently developmental, undergoing variation with each recurrence. This results in a flexible structure in which repetition is continuously reinterpreted.

3.5.2. First Episode (B)

The first episode (B) introduces contrasting material in a related key area (F Major), offering a more lyrical and Schumann-like Melody with flowing texture. However, the thematic content remains closely derived from the principal motive, preserving unity across sections.

3.5.3. Main Theme (A)

The return of A is varied, with alterations in texture and harmonic support, emphasizing process over literal repetition. Although the main theme is first stated in F minor, its later recurrence preserves its rhythmic identity while being recontextualized in D flat major.

3.5.4. Second Episode (C)

A second, more expansive episode (C) functions as a developmental core, incorporating fragmentation, sequential treatment, and contrapuntal elaboration. This section traverses multiple tonal regions and intensifies harmonic instability, thereby extending the scope of the rondo design beyond its Classical prototype.

3.5.5. Main Theme (A) and Coda

Subsequent returns of the refrain integrate recapitulatory functions, as the thematic material is gradually re-centered in the tonic key (F minor). The coda assumes a climactic role, consolidating F major (parallel key of tonic) materials through increased textural density and rhythmic insistence, while also recalling earlier motives to reinforce cyclic coherence.

In this light, the movement may be understood as a transformed rondo in which traditional alternation between refrain and episodes is subsumed into a continuous developmental process. Brahms thus redefines the rondo principle, integrating it with sonata-like procedures to achieve both structural unity and expressive culmination.

4. Conclusions

Johannes Brahms followed the structural and formal traditions established by Ludwig van Beethoven, while at the same time absorbing elements of musical language and gesture from his contemporaries, including Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, Robert Schumann, and Frédéric Chopin. Unlike Liszt or Chopin, whose early piano works often reflect either pedagogical origins or salon-oriented styles, Brahms's early piano compositions already display a remarkable level of structural control and compositional maturity. Although these works may not represent the peak of his artistic output, they reveal a highly developed musical voice from an early stage, even as his later works tend to favor more concise forms.

Brahms's ability to establish a distinctive compositional language at a relatively young age stands in contrast to composers such as Franz Schubert, whose mature piano style

emerged only in his final works. Nevertheless, Brahms's piano music remains less frequently performed, due in part to several practical and aesthetic factors. His pianistic writing often aspires to orchestral and chamber textures rather than exploiting the instrument's idiomatic sonorities, which can result in a certain lack of immediacy in purely pianistic terms. Furthermore, his works tend either toward large-scale structures or collections of character pieces, offering relatively few compositions of moderate length suitable for standard recital programming. In addition, the technical demands of his music—often involving wide stretches and dense textures—can be physically challenging and less accessible for pedagogical use compared to the more graded technical range found in Chopin's works.

However, for performers capable of meeting these demands and engaging deeply with the music, Brahms's piano works offer profound expressive potential. Their structural integrity, harmonic richness, and emotional depth enable them to communicate with exceptional power, ultimately achieving a level of musical expression that can deeply resonate with listeners.

Abbreviations

C. O. Sternau Otto Julius Inkermann Sternau

Author Contributions

MingChih Hsieh: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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