

THE ROLE OF MUSICAL CONSTRUCTION IN APPROACHING AND RENDERING OF OP. 52 *LIEBESLIEDER-WALZER* BY JOHANNES BRAHMS

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SUMMARY. In this article, I have outlined several aspects related to the musical structure and the conducting approach to the Brahms work for its interpretation. We adapted our interpretive concept to what the waltz means, and in the 18 pieces written in ternary meter, I presented some rhythmical-melodic formulas specific to the waltz. A specific aspect of Brahms's music was the use of hemiolas, both in the vocal/choral part and in the piano accompaniment, which do not disrupt the flow of the musical discourse. In this regard, I proposed my own scheme for the articulation of each piece among the 18 waltzes, constituting an important element of my interpretative vision.

Keywords: Brahms, Waltzes, Love Songs, Musical Construction, Conducting Approach

Motto

*"If you have a good voice, do not hesitate
for a moment to cultivate it,
considering it the most beautiful
gift that nature has given you."*

Robert Schumann

Introduction

The cycle "Liebeslieder-Walzer" op. 52 by Johannes Brahms contains 18 waltzes and it is a masterpiece of the repertoire for voices with piano accompaniment (for four hands) combining the lyricism and expressiveness of the German lied with the rhythm of the Viennese waltz.

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The vocal creation of Brahms occupies an important place, along with the symphonic and chamber works, both in terms of its consistency as well as its quality and beauty. Brahmsian Lieds, choruses and vocal-symphonic works stand out as great achievements of the Romantic era.

Presentation of the conductor's concept²

The author's original manuscript, which is in the possession of the "Friends of Music" Society in Vienna, has no title, no motto, and no date to indicate when it was composed.

The first edition was released in October 1869 under the title *Liebeslieder. Waltz for the Pianoforte zu vier Händen und Gesang ad libitum* op. 52 composed by Johannes Brahms; published by and property of N. Simrock in Berlin. In the original work there is a different sequence of waltzes than in the first edition: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 16:

1. Rede, Mädchen, allzu liebes (Tell me, my sweetest girl)
2. Am Gesteine rauscht die Flut (The wildly lashed waves)
3. O, die Frauen (O women, o women)
4. Wie des Abends schöne Röte (Like a lovely sunset)
5. Die grüne Hopfenranke (The green tendrils of the vine)
6. Ein kleiner, hübscher Vogel (A pretty little bird)
7. Wohl schön bewandt war es (All seemed rosy)
8. Wenn so lind dein Auge mir (When you gaze at me so tenderly)
9. Am Donaustrande (On the Danube's shore)
10. O, wie sanft die Quelle (Ah, how gently the stream)
11. Nein, es ist nicht auszukommen (No, it is not possible)
12. Schlosser auf, und mache Schlösser (Locksmith, come, make me padlocks)
13. Vögelein durchrauscht die Luft (A little bird flies through the skies)
14. Sieh', wie ist die Welle klar (See how clear the waves are)
15. Nachtigall, sie singt so schön (The nightingale sings so sweetly)
16. Ein dunkeler Schacht ist Liebe (Love is a dark pit)
17. Nicht wandle, mein Licht (Do not wander, my love)
18. Es bebet das Gesträuche (The foliage trembles).

² Para, Ciprian, *Conceptia interpretativă în demersul dirijoral (Interpretive Concept in the Conducting Approach)*, Editura Media Musica, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, p. 34.

The first page of the opus displays the indication Waltz on the verses of poet Georg Friedrich Daumer extracted from the volume "Polydora". On this poetic background Brahms created a music vibrating with hope, a music of dance, youth and love. The 18 vocal miniatures were composed by Brahms in the summer of 1869 in Lichtenthal overwhelmed by the thrill of love for Iulia Schumann, the daughter of old friends: Robert and Clara Schumann.

The first audition of these waltzes took place in Vienna on January 5, 1870.

Each waltz has a focused topic about the joys or sorrows of love. Although each piece is well individualized, there is an overall unity of the cycle due to the expressive resonance detectable between certain numbers (we will return to this resonance throughout the work).

Before moving on to a thorough analysis, we point out the fact that the pieces of the cycle alternate between a more settled tempo of an effective ternary movement (ländler) and a more moving tempo characteristic to the alert waltz which involves the concentration of the beats in 1 (the Viennese waltz). Another observation is that on the one hand in these waltzes we find echoes of the lyrics of the Schumannian lied, and on the other hand the brilliance of the Viennese waltz of Johann Strauss the son (1825-1899) contemporary with Brahms.³

From the conductor's perspective, the interpretation of these waltzes requires a deep understanding of the balance between the voices and the pianistic accompaniment, the choice of the appropriate tempo according to the character of each waltz, the subtle agogics, the expressivity of the poetic texts, the highlighting of the hemiolas, a varied and contrasting dynamic, flexibility in exchange for rigidity in the interpretation, etc.⁴

Coming back to the title, which is called **Love Songs** and the subtitle **Waltzes for piano for four hands and voices ad libitum**, we are morally obliged to ground our interpretive conception in what the waltz actually means. Without any exception, the 18 pieces are written in ternary meter using specific rhythmic formulas, so undoubtedly – a waltz.

The presence of hemiolas in these waltzes' points some of the parts towards a diversity of the musical discourse (no. 13) without disturbing its natural flow.⁵

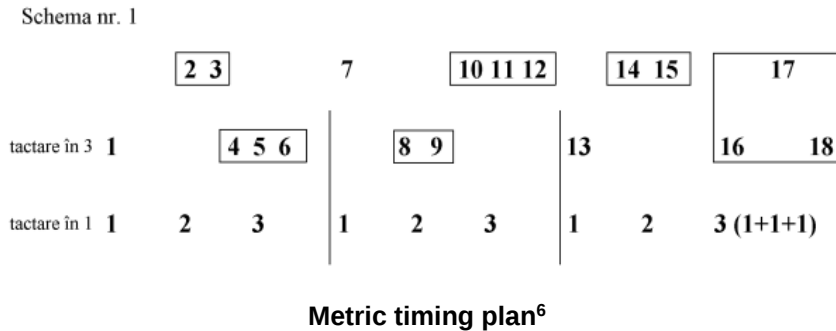
³ Timaru, Valentin, *Stilistică Muzicală (Musical Stylistics)*, Editura MediaMusica, vol. I, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, p. 257.

⁴ Ștefănescu, Ioana, *Arta lui Brahms din perspectiva secolului XX (Brahms' art from a 20th century perspective)*, Teză de Doctorat (Doctoral Thesis), Conservatorul de Muzică "Gh. Dima", Cluj-Napoca, 1974.

⁵ Olsen, Glen, *The Liebeslieder Walzer, op. 52, of Johannes Brahms*, Olsen-CJ-Sept-2001.pdf

Seen as a whole, half of the pieces are conceived as a concentrated ternary movement, therefore timed in 1 (no. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 16, 18) while the other half is conceived in the usual ternary timed in 3 (no. 2, 3, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17). (Figure 1)

Figure 1



If we were to overlap these two conceptions of the artistic realization of the cycle, we would notice the following distribution: diagram no. 1. We find it interesting to observe the oscillation between the timings in 1 and 3 which groups the pieces in a first wave from no. 1-6 then the second wave from no. 7-12 and the third wave from no. 13-18.

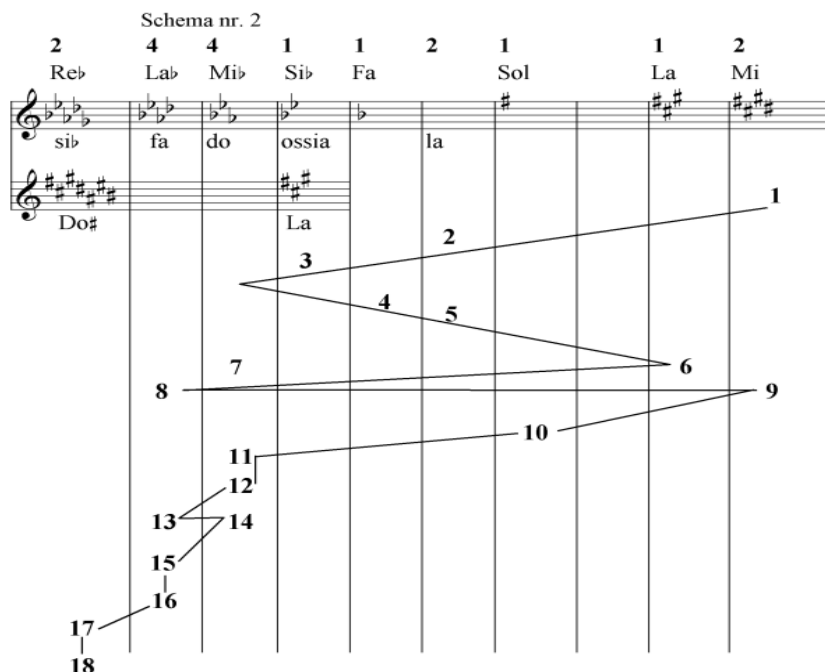
Noteworthy the tonal framework of the cycle. In this sense, I designed diagram no. 2 that shows cases how the major tonalities with 4 and 3 flats respectively (A flat, E flat) prevail.

Starting from the beginning to the middle of the cycle, the composer gropes around the tonalities with 1, 3, 4 sharps, followed by a transit zone through tonalities without alterations (**A**) then tonalities with 1, 2 flats so that after no. 10 to settle on keys with 3, 4 flats.

In this sense, we could imagine a real winding of the functional circuit (Figure 2).

⁶ Diagram created by Ciprian Para, 2025.

Figure 2



The tonal plan used by Brahms in Op. 52⁷

In an ideal interpretation these two parameters should be corroborated of course; in this sense, it would be interesting to observe the place of the pieces in the respective keys seen in this serpentine that requires to be intensively timed in 1 or 3. We see a concentration of waltzes that require to be interpreted in both 1 and 3, in the area of keys with flats.

Regarding the formal conception, the framework for the development of the entire cycle, we can extract several generalities that come to the aid of the interpretative process:

- the prevalence of bistrophic forms (with or without recapitulation)
- the appearance of both symmetrical phrases and those that are atypical, external expansions respectively which, however, are circumscribed within the entire stanza without creating noticeable disturbances

⁷ Diagram created by Para Ciprian, 2025.

- noteworthy the moments of completion of the choral phrases by the piano.

All of this provides sufficient clues towards the correct decoding of the interpretative intention.

In terms of the actual musical “content”, we point out two types of rhythmic cells:

- downbeat measure: no. 11 (E.g.1)

E.g. 1



Crusic rhythmic-melodic cells⁸

- and upbeat measure: no. 6 (E.g.2)

E.g. 2



Anacrusic rhythmic-melodic cells⁹

⁸ Brahms, Johannes, *Sämtliche Werke, Band 20*, Editura Breitkopf&Härtel, Leipzig, op.52, 1926-27

⁹ Idem.

These bring about the melodic configurations specific to the waltz turn.

The contrapuntal procedures in these delightful vocal miniatures occupy an important place both in the interweaving of the choral parts with the accompaniment and in the merging of the voices in the choral ensemble; this is precisely where the mastery of the polyphonist Brahms lies, the contrapuntal subtleties not being an end in themselves but the result of accumulations along the lines of his predecessors: Bach-Beethoven-Brahms.

We also aim to trace the ways in which Brahms uses the vocal parts. Starting from the monody (unison) of a single voice, enabled to be performed either with the part or with a soloist (no. 7, 17) then the antiphonic alternation between the women's choir and the men's choir (no. 1, 5) passing through pieces intended for male voices (no. 3, 14) and female voices (no. 4, 13) to the point of balance which is the classic mixed choir ensemble: (no. 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18).

The accompaniment is not, in our view, an accompaniment per se, being an equal partner in the true sense of the word.

Brahms's pianism remains more massive, perhaps more monumental; it is no coincidence that the composer wants two performers at one piano.

The melodic turns are basically the ones that R. Schumann made us familiar with in his wonderful lieder, but at the same time the "Brahmsian outbursts" in his great piano pages are also charming.

A coherent approach must emphasize the unity of the Brahmsian cycle with attention to the architectonic structure of the entire cycle, as well as each individual number.

Within interpretative performance, the conductor must pay attention to the contrast between the energetic pieces and the most internalized ones, achieving a balance in the development of the entire waltz cycle.¹⁰

I was deeply impressed when I first listened to this opus of great refinement and expressiveness in the summer of 1995 at the Accademia Santa Cecilia in Rome.

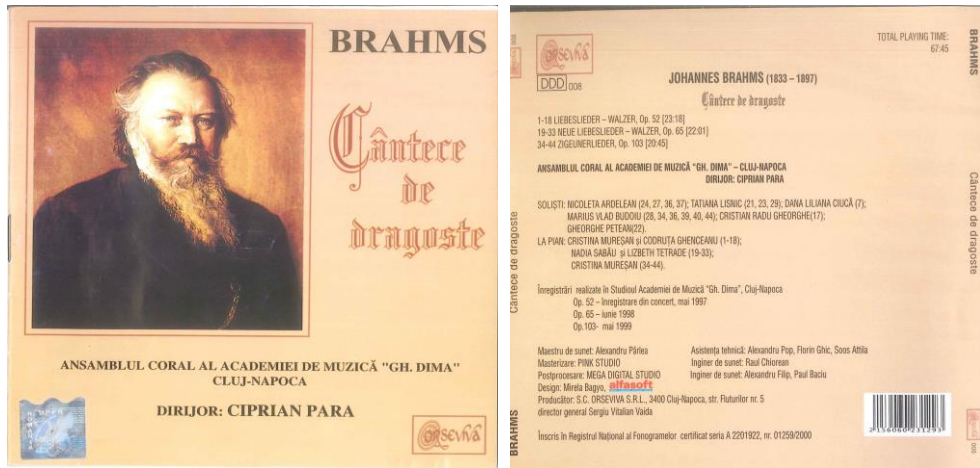
Coming back to Cluj, I discovered the complete works of great Brahms in the library of the Music Academy. After a careful study of opus 52, I had the chance and the joy to conduct this opus in its entirety in the company of the "George Enescu" Philharmonic Choir in Bucharest (150 years after the composer's death). Later, still in 1997 I conducted in Cluj as well this Brahmsian opus in the company of the Choral Ensemble of the Theoretical Faculty of the

¹⁰ Para, Ciprian, *Concepția interpretativă în demersul dirijoral (Interpretive Concept in the Conducting Approach)*, Editura Media Musica, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, p. 34.

Academy of Music. There were two different interpretative versions of the same opus, although there was the same conducting conception, both at a professional and academic level, the concerts were of a high artistic level.

After a few years, I conducted two more Brahms opuses, namely op. 65 Neue Liebeslieder-Walzer and op. 103 Zigeunerlieder, which I recorded and edited on a CD together with op. 52. (Figure 3)

Figure 3



CD Brahms op. 52, op.65 and op. 103 - conductor Ciprian Para¹¹

These opuses are conceived as vocal miniatures and constitute one of the areas of great interest that I have shown, namely for the romantic choral music of Johannes Brahms. Practically, it was the result of three years of assiduous work together with the Choral Ensemble of the Academy of Music from Cluj, whose help I owe the opportunity to finalize my conducting conception. The version I opted for is not the original one – vocal quartet with piano accompaniment for four hands – but a choral one alternating with solo “moments”. An incentive for the realization of this variant was also that of having an ample choral apparatus capable of approaching these opuses. On the other hand, and as far as the vocal soloists are concerned,

¹¹ Para, Ciprian, *Demersul dirijoral ca factor de împlinire a unei concepții interpretative (The conducting approach as a factor in fulfilling an interpretive conception)*, Doctoral Thesis, “Gh. Dima” Music Academy, Cluj-Napoca, chapter. IV, 2003, p. 125.

we benefited from very special voices at that time, which worked well together with the pianists. Attracted by the beauty of Brahmsian choral music, we gave ourselves entirely to it, trying to express the most subtle aspects of its romantic language in the most edifying way possible.

Regarding the concept of conducting, Maestro Marin Constantin states:

“In the interpretative approach, the ways to use the dynamic and agogic arsenal will be determined only by passing them through the stylistic filter. Therefore, respecting the ‘tale-quale’ of the musical commentary belonging to the composer or editor involves the danger of distorting artistic expression, of mechanical, scholastic rendering, if it is not analyzed stylistically, if it is not preceded by a deep understanding of the author and their intrinsic particularities”¹²

Conclusion

If we were to say everything we feel about this wonderful opus, we could summarize that it was written for: “big hands and special voices”.

We reserve the right to have written down some subjective points of view from the performer’s position. It is natural for the performer to remain a subjective temperament who constantly strives to get closer to the objective message of the score through everything it offers.

The analysis of these famous musical pages demonstrates the quality, value and extraordinary expressiveness of the “Liebeslieder-Walzer” cycle, which manages to combine the dancing elements of the waltz with the depth of the German *Ländler*, creating a cycle full of contrasts, nuances, subtleties, love and hope.

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¹² Marin, Constantin, *Artă construcției și interpretării corale (The Art of Choral Construction and Interpretation)*, Teză de Doctorat, (Doctoral Thesis), Conservatorul de Muzică “G. Dima”, Cluj-Napoca, 1984, p. 49.

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