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Two Symphonies: Mozart's 40th and Brahms' 4th

Mozart's Symphony #40 in G Minor and Brahms' Symphony #4 in E Minor are both examples of the genre of symphonic orchestral music, so one would expect them to share much in common. Indeed, the two works do have a great deal of similarities. However, the two compositions are separated not only by nearly a century, but also by a change in the predominant social attitudes toward music of the era. Accordingly, the differences between the Mozart and Brahms symphonies reflect the transition from the Classical to the Romantic era. Though the symphonies are based around many of the same elements, the approaches with which Mozart and Brahms approach these elements are somewhat different. In particular, a number of comparisons can be drawn between the first movements of each symphony that are representative of the two works.

The symphony was developed as a musical form during the Viennese Classical period, and a set of traditional guidelines — almost a formula — for its structure and composition were established. The Mozart and Brahms symphonies are both based around these to some degree. In particular, Mozart, who was composing during the Classical period, adhered relatively strictly to this formula. Brahms, composing at a much later time when the symphony had been an established form for over a hundred years, also used most of the key elements of the Classical symphony, though he treated them much more loosely and freely. In the most general respects, the basic characteristics of a Classical symphony are present in both symphonies. The instrumentation is largely similar; Brahms does expand the orchestra somewhat by adding a few more brass instruments and percussion, most notably the triangle, but it is not fundamentally different than the one Mozart calls for. As for the overall structure of the work, the traditional Classical symphony has four movements: a fast movement in sonata form, a slow movement, a dance movement

usually consisting of a minuet and trio, and a fast finale. This is precisely the structure Mozart uses in his symphony. Brahms's fourth symphony also has four movements, though the forms are somewhat different. For example, his third movement is a very fast movement in sonata form; this was inspired by Beethoven's scherzo movements, which were essentially much faster minuets and trios, but between the fast tempo and the use of sonata form, Brahms' third movement no longer sounds like a dance. Even more noteworthy is the fourth movement, which is written in passacaglia form, a form characteristic not of the Classical or Romantic periods but the Baroque; its use of polyphony and strict variations make it quite unlike the usual sonata or rondo form finale of a symphony. In these respects, Brahms deviates from the traditional structure for the symphony established during the Classical period. His modifications are largely based on returning to older forms, which is the opposite of the direction being taken by other Romantic composers who were modifying the four-movement symphony form even more greatly or doing away with it entirely; however, it is still not characterized by the comparatively strict adherence to standard forms as in Mozart's fortieth symphony. Even so, because of their shared heritage, on the broadest level these two compositions have many elements in common.

The first movement of a symphony is traditionally in sonata form, and the Brahms and Mozart symphonies are no exception. The sonata form, which was developed during the Classical period, is based around a contrast between two themes in different keys, along with a modulatory bridge theme that joins them. The themes are introduced in the exposition section: there is a statement of the first theme, followed by a bridge that makes the transition to the key of the second theme, then a statement of the second theme, and usually a concluding cadence theme. The second major section of the sonata form, and perhaps the most important, is the development section, in which the composer has the freedom to develop the previously-introduced themes in a new direction. Finally, the recapitulation sections returns to the original themes, essentially a repeat of the exposition; however, the bridge theme and second theme are modified such that the entire recapitulation is in the tonic key of the first theme. Additionally, this basic form was commonly augmented by adding a short introduction at the beginning or coda at the end.

This common structure does, in fact, fit the opening movement of Mozart's fortieth symphony nearly exactly. The movement opens with a very brief introduction that rapidly leads into the first theme; because it is only a few notes in length, and because it does not contain any real melodic substance, its presence is hardly even noticeable at all. The real beginning of this movement is the first theme, which is introduced by the strings and orchestra in the tonic key of G minor. This theme begins quietly and grows louder, with a very active melody and a highly rhythmic quality resulting from the fast tempo and a recurring rhythmic motive. Because of its easily recognizable melody, this theme has become one of the most distinctive elements of this symphony; it is perhaps one of the most recognizable melodies from the large array of Mozart's works. After the theme is played twice, a bridge theme follows; this theme makes the transition from the key of G minor to B flat major, the key of the next theme, then comes to a cadence. The second theme provides quite a contrast to the first: not only is it in a different key, it also differs in dynamics and rhythm, being much slower, softer, and less rhythmic. This theme is played twice, though with a few variations on the second iteration. It is followed by a brief cadence theme and a series of cadences that bring the exposition to an end. Notably, the entire exposition section is itself repeated before the beginning of the development; this is significant because it later became common to omit this repeat, but Mozart was still adhering strictly to the traditional sonata form.

The development section, which is relatively short compared to some later symphonic movements such as the Brahms, is based around the first theme. It opens with the first theme essentially as it was presented in the exposition, but then begins to modulate it to new keys; next, the same theme enters repeatedly, creating a polyphonic texture. The other major device used in the development is practically identical to the one Beethoven would later use in the first movement of his fifth symphony: fragmentation. A segment of the first theme is repeatedly played, with instrumentation alternating between the strings and the woodwinds; as this progresses, the familiar rhythmic motive of the first theme is gradually shortened into increasingly smaller fragments, creating increasingly greater tension. This tension is resolved when the music makes the transition to the recapitulation section, which is nearly a repeat of the exposition. As expected, the first theme is unchanged, but the bridge and second theme have been modified to remain in the tonic key; the second theme seems to have a new mood once it is moved from the major mode to the minor.

Finally, a short coda uses parts of the first theme and repeated cadences to bring the movement to an end. Overall, this movement is essentially a typical example of sonata form, with its use of two contrasting themes and their development. There are no elements in Mozart's symphony movement that seem out of place in this traditional form.

The first movement of Brahms' fourth symphony, like the Mozart symphony described above, is also in sonata form. By contrast, however, Brahms does not always follow the form as strictly as Mozart does; instead, he uses variations on it to allow himself more freedom of expression, while still keeping the musical traditions closely in mind. This movement opens directly with the first theme. Whereas most early symphonies typically had some sort of introductory passage — an extremely short one in the case of the Mozart symphony — Brahms omits it entirely. Indeed, it is now known that Brahms wrote an introduction, then decided to omit it; by doing so, it appears that he has deliberately chosen to emphasize the first theme even more. The beginning of the first theme, therefore, serves also as the introduction to the symphony. It is able to do so because the theme itself is distinctive and memorable, beginning with a series of repetitions of a two-note motive in the strings, consisting of a quarter note followed by a half note. It is in the key of E minor, and alternates between ascending and descending pairs of notes separated by consistent intervals. The remainder of the first theme is developed from this beginning, by repeating the sequence of two-note pairs then expanding it with longer, more elaborate variations. Overall, the theme has a delicate, sad and emotional feel, which contrasts with the following second theme section. The second theme makes the transition into a major key, and includes sections played by the brass instruments; this gives it more of a triumphant character. The rest of the exposition section is essentially as one would expect from a sonata-form symphony movement.

However, the first major modification of the form becomes apparent immediately after the end of the exposition section. At this point, it is expected that either a repeat of the exposition or the development section will follow; traditionally a repeat was called for, though it became commonplace in later, longer symphonies to omit this repeat. Brahms repeats the opening section of the first theme, which makes it seem as though he is beginning a repeat of the exposition.

However, midway through the phrase, the harmonies change and the theme begins to modulate to new keys; it becomes apparent that this is, in fact, the development rather than a repeat of the exposition. The remainder of the development is fairly straightforward, primarily focusing on the first theme, and developing and modulating it. After the end of the development, a similar modification to the form takes place. A set of variations on a recognizable motive from the first theme serve as a retransition, bridging the development section to what appears to be a variation on the first theme: the repeated two-note motives from the first theme, played considerably slower, with longer note values. However, after a few notes, the theme returns to its original tempo, and the symphony continues with the first theme as it was originally played: this is, in fact, the recapitulation. It seems to be quite uncommon for a symphony movement in sonata form to alter the theme in this way during the recapitulation, so this has some significance. It is an example of the way in which Brahms manipulated the conventional forms in some new directions, a contrast with the Mozart symphony previously described. However, it is still noteworthy that so much of the remainder of this movement, and indeed the rest of the symphony, is based on the traditions of symphonic construction.

While there are a number of interesting comparisons that can be drawn from the first movements of these symphonies, it is hardly a complete comparison of the two works. These two symphonies — like all others — are multi-movement works, and need to be viewed as such. This is especially true in the case of the Brahms symphony. Though Brahms once described the work as “a couple of entractes [that] put together make what is commonly called a symphony,” his modesty here belies the true nature of the symphony. The work as a whole has a cohesive unity of sorts; there is a sense that the composition has a meaning. It is not an explicitly defined meaning as was the case with many Romantic works, such as programmatic symphonies, but a more abstract one. In this respect, it is quite similar to Beethoven’s symphonies, which are known to have been an inspiration to Brahms. The Beethoven symphonies, such as his third and fifth, were often based around the conflict between major and minor modes, and had triumphant endings. In this symphony, Brahms has inverted this emotional progression somewhat: though the second and third movements have brighter major modes, the symphony ends as it began, with a sense of

sadness. By contrast, the Mozart symphony does not have quite the degree of large-scale unity that the Brahms symphony does. Certainly, it was written as a symphony in four movements, and is intended to be listened to as such, but the movements are more able to stand alone. There is less of a sense that the symphony as a whole has a specific meaning, whether a concrete or abstract one. In this way, the Mozart and Brahms symphonies differ.

It is also necessary to consider these works in their contexts to fully understand them. Mozart's symphony was written during the later years of the Classical period, and in general it reflects the musical style of the era. Musical development at this time was primarily influenced by reactions to the earlier Baroque music, and by the Enlightenment philosophy that was becoming dominant. Specifically, the music of the preceding Baroque era was characterized by complexity in polyphonic texture and long intricate melodies; one of the new musical ideas of the Viennese Classical style was to eschew this complexity for simpler, easier to understand music. This was closely related to the philosophy of Enlightenment, which called for natural, pleasing music that could serve as entertainment. The idea of music as popular entertainment is an explanation for Mozart's adherence to well-known conventional forms in this symphony, such as the sonata form: because these forms could be expected to be familiar to contemporary audiences, their use would make the composition more understandable. This philosophy also reveals itself in a few other elements of Mozart's symphony; for example, the themes are quite tuneful and made up of natural-sounding melodies, and they are repeated frequently to ensure that they are made clear to the listener. However, this particular symphony does have a few differences that distinguish it from the typical Mozart symphony or the typical Classical symphony. This is one of only two symphonies that Mozart wrote in a minor key, and this gives it a different, somewhat disquieting feel. This is evident in the first theme in particular, with its G minor key and interrupted, agitated rhythms. Though the symphony is unquestionably in the Classical style, a few unusual elements of emotion are added to the strict forms.

Brahms' symphony was written nearly a century later, during the Romantic era. The prevailing attitudes toward music had changed significantly, so it is not altogether surprising that there are a few differences when compared to Mozart's symphony. Music had become even more

greatly respected as an art form, but more importantly it began to be seen not just as a form of entertainment but as a medium for expression of emotional ideas. It was expected that compositions would reflect the composer's individual aesthetic, so a much greater amount of individuality and variation were present in the musical works of this era; the conventional forms were no longer seen as rigid structures to be strictly adhered to but suggestions that formed a framework for a more varied composition. When symphonies were composed, it became common to diverge from the traditional forms, or to throw them out completely; most works were not defined by strict formulaic structures. This tendency is evident in Brahms' fourth symphony, in his modifications to the first movement's sonata form described above. More notable are the changes in the other movements: the use of harmonies based on medieval modes in the second movement, and the use of a passacaglia structure in the fourth movement, for example. However, when viewed in the light of some of the other compositions taking place at the time, the symphony seems traditional by comparison. The framework of Brahms' composition is the Classical symphony form, and even when he diverges from it, he clearly does so with Classical forms and even older traditional structures in mind. Therefore, in comparison to Mozart, Brahms is making use of a new degree of freedom in his composition; however, in comparison to other Romantic composers, he certainly has more of a respect for the past. In this respect, the Brahms symphony is notable amongst Romantic works for integrating both old and new elements of music.

The two symphonies by Mozart and Brahms represent two different stages in the evolution of the symphonic genre. Mozart's fortieth symphony demonstrates a strict adherence to conventional structures in its first movement, reflecting the qualities of simplicity and structure that were valued during the Viennese Classical period; however, it also contains some uncharacteristic elements of disquiet and agitation. Brahms' fourth symphony, in its first movement and otherwise, takes advantage of some of the Romantic individualism and freedom of expression. It creates a sense of emotional progression throughout the work as a whole, another Romantic notion. However, it also reaches back to earlier musical periods to combine its Romanticism with tradition. Linking the two symphonies together is the venerable symphony form, which serves as a basis for these two works as well as so many others.