# Brahms: Songs With Words And Songs Without Words†

by

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The easiest way to introduce my subject is to explain the difficulties that occasioned my investigations, and the steps by which I tried to resolve them. So if you will forgive me, I shall indulge in a bit of autobiography. (Please remember that, like all other autobiographies, this one is in part a dramatic construction, containing *Dichtung* as well as *Wahrheit* but I hope that the truth will outweigh the poetry.)

What started me off was the nagging sense of discomfort I experienced while playing and listening to certain passages in Brahms's instrumental works--passages in which the structure or the expressive intent seemed unclear. Now, when confronting such a meticulous craftsman as Brahms, I found it difficult to believe that the fault was not my own; nevertheless I was unable to resolve the problems that arose when I tried, even on an elementary level, to work out a

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† This essay was presented, in slightly different form, as a lecture in connection with the Brahms Conference at the Library of Congress in May 1983. It is published here by permission of the Library of Congress.

convincing performance of, for example, the opening of the Intermezzo in E minor, Op. 119, No. 2. How was the second phrase (mm. 3-10) to be construed? It seemed to be a redundantly expansive repetition of the first two measures. Making two false starts, it expanded those measures into three. Achieving the desired dominant, it rested there for another measure and a half; then it was still further augmented by what sounded like a new start, but one that proved to be false, since it initiated, instead of a return of the opening, two more measures of transition before that return. Another passage suffering from redundancy was the reprise, in which the corresponding second phrase again stretched two measures into three, this time by reiteration of its second measure rather than its first (mm. 74-76). The rest of the Intermezzo proceeded smoothly and elegantly, but those two important thematic statements remained as stumbling-blocks.

Perhaps even more alarming, I heard some of Brahms's most celebrated lyrical utterances--themes of slow movements--as developing in an almost uncontrolled manner, as if following the dictates of a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" insufficiently "recollected in tranquillity." As a result I found myself regretfully accusing the composer of sentimentality when I listened to the Andante moderato of the A minor String Quartet, Op. 51, No. 2. Despite the cogency of Schoenberg's well-known analysis,[1] its huge opening period of 42

[1] Arnold Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," *Style and Idea*, (New York, 1975), pp. 429-36.

measures seemed bloated and persistent rather than tranquil and long-breathed--in part, at least, because of that motivic manipulation praised by Schoenberg, yet somehow overwrought (in both senses) in the context of the extended periodic structure.

Similar blame attached to the slow movements of all three violin sonatas. In the Adagio of the G major, Op. 78, the opening 9-measure phrase in the piano seemed full of redundancies; the contrasting phrase in the violin, too long for the material it contained. The Andante tranquillo of the A major Sonata, Op. 100, began promisingly with a 4-measure violin tune but then started to ramble; and the return of the opening idea, jointly in piano and violin, not only repeated pleonastically but also enfeebled its own cadence, extending it into a bridge by still further motivic repetition. The Adagio of the D minor, Op. 108, after a promising start, satiated the ear with a violin cantilena of 33 measures, barely punctuated by rests. After 18 of those measures, when one might have supposed it to be on the point of conclusion, it rose instead to an ouburst of cloying double-stopped thirds.

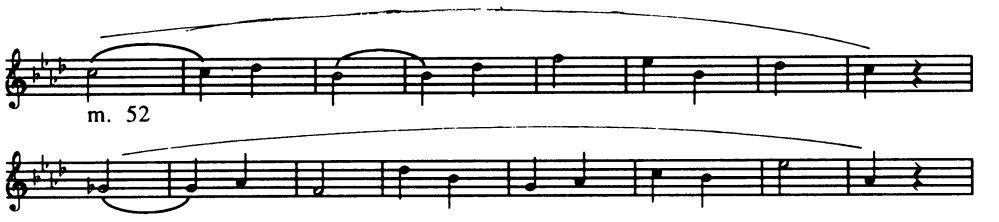
The clue to a possible resolution of my difficulties came by way of an unexpected source that presented an entirely different--almost an opposite--problem. The compositions so far cited exemplify apparently unmotivated freedom of expansion; in contrast, the central portion of the F minor Intermezzo, Op. 118, No. 4, suffers from excessive rigidity of pattern (mm. 52 ff.). It consists of 40 almost tunelessly bare measures, articulated in strict multiples of 2, 4, and 8,

presenting an equally strict canon between the two hands. Indeed, if one looks through the entire piece one finds a construction of imitative motivic play, rhythmically rigid and almost tuneless, only rarely punctuated by wisps of cadential melody (as in mm. 7-11, and in similar portions of the reprise). What is one to make of this?

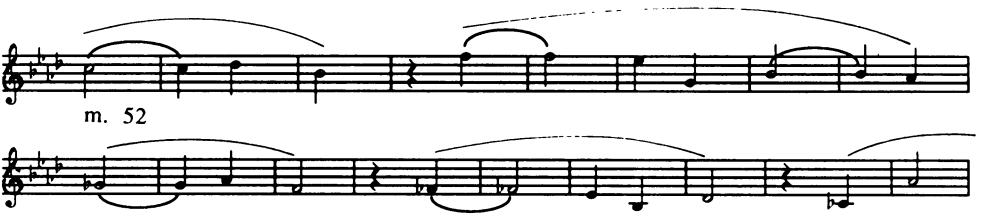
It was in the course of examining some songs that I hit upon a possible answer. I was struck by the accompaniments of such songs as *Ruhe, Süssliebchen*, Op. 33, No. 9, and *Geheimnis*, Op. 71, No. 3, as well as the concluding section (*ziemlich langsam*) of *Von ewiger Liebe*, Op. 43, No. 1. For long stretches these exhibit patterning just as strict (and as tuneless) as that of the Intermezzo. To be sure, they are only accompaniments and not independent textures. They may make sense as pattern and as progression; but their melodic content, their expressive meaning, is furnished by the vocal part. Especially interesting in that regard is *Schwermut*, Op. 58 no. 5, in which the regularity of the 2-measure accompaniment pattern is offset by the much freer vocal line, which implies successive groupings of 3 measures, 4, and 1.

What I wish now to suggest is that we should listen to the persistent patterns of the F minor Intermezzo in the same way: as accompaniments. Only now there is no vocal part. Or is there? It is in fact easy to hear a melody implied by the central section, perhaps as in Ex. 1a. Or one can divide the phrases less regularly, in the manner of *Schwermut*, as in Ex. 1b. In any event, the imagination of some

## Example 1a




## Example 1b



such line is helpful, if not essential, in working out an appropriate articulation for the otherwise monotonous progressions.

As for the occasional cadential flowerings of the first and last sections of the piece, those melodic moments likewise find their parallels among the songs. Even the most subordinate accompaniment may burgeon when the voice is resting. (Such interludes punctuate *Meerfahrt*, Op. 96, No. 4, and *Nachtigall*, Op. 97, No. 1, to name only two.) Paradoxically, then, the snatches of heard melody in the Intermezzo occur only when the unheard melody--the true voice of the composition--is silent.

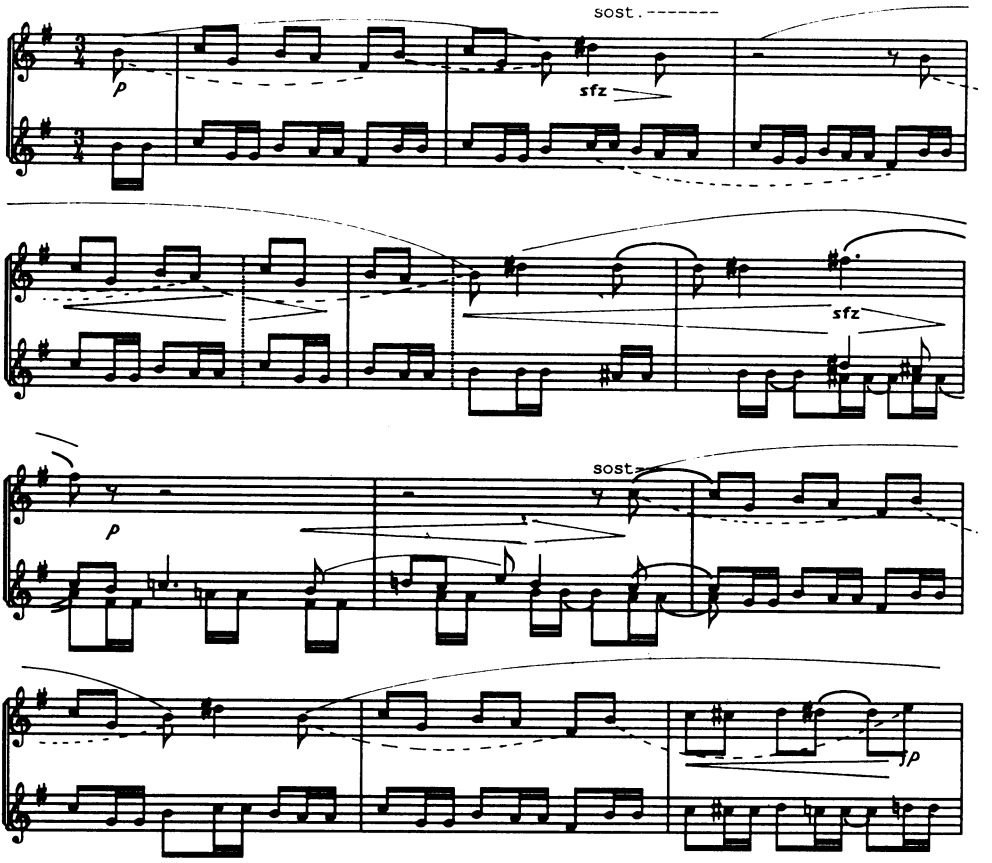
There is a beautiful precedent for the implied voice, the unsung melody. It was set, of course, by Schumann. In one of his most characteristic compositions for piano, the *Humoreske*, Op. 20, the second movement opens with a passage uniquely notated. A third staff is added between the other two, containing an *innere Stimme* written in small notes. This voice, a sustained melody implied by the active figuration of the right hand, is not meant to be played but rather to be thought--to be heard with the inner ear. Perhaps, indeed, the entire piece is not intended to be performed--exposed to an audience--but only to be played privately, for oneself. At the most, it is for intimate gatherings of kindred spirits, those to whom Schumann referred when he appended Schlegel's lines as a motto for his *Fantasie*, Op. 17:

*Durch all Töne tönet*
*Im bunten Erdentraum*
*Ein leiser Ton gezogen*
*Für den der heimlich lauschet.*

Could the hypothesis of the inner song help me to hear my original problem-pieces in a more intelligible way? Not only did I find that to be the case, but I could sometimes even discover specific songs to serve as models. For the E minor Intermezzo it was one of the most familiar, *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*, Op. 105, No. 2. If one plays the opening piano part alone, the effect is not that of an accompaniment but of a smoothly flowing melody--although an odd one, consisting of a very short phrase and a very long one, 2 1/2 and 6 1/2 measures respectively, each resolving on the tonic. But if the voice is now added, the articulation changes: it becomes 2 1/2, 2 1/2, 1 1/2, and 1 1/2 measures, separated by pauses. The voice has imposed upon the piano its own form, one that subtly balances symmetry (within each pair of phrases) and asymmetry (the resultant 5 1/2 : 3 1/2 ratio of the whole). The difference between the two phrasings is pointed up at m. 5, where the piano might have wished to make a break, as suggested by the melodic fall and the slurring, but was prevented by the dissonant harmony; now the voice makes the break for the piano, as indicated by the rhyme-word *Kummer* followed by a rest.

Here, then, is an accompaniment that, unlike those previously examined, is a fully realized musical entity; yet it depends on the articulative power of the vocal line to clarify its structure. Let us imagine that the problematic passages in the Intermezzo are similarly informed--but by a silent *innere Stimme*. We shall not have to invent its melody, which is already present in the line of the piano, ready and waiting to be given a fully lyrical transformation in the *maggiore*. What is open to question, however, is the exact handling of the puzzling second phrase: when does the imagined voice rest, and when does it resume? The simplest and perhaps most effective solution (Ex. 2a) assumes that the opening 2-measure phrase is vocal, but that it is followed by an interlude--actually overlapped by it, for the moment of *sostenuto* can be heard both as an afterbeat (in the soprano) and as an anacrusis (in the inner parts). That interlude offers an exact repetition of the first measures; but now the voice re-enters with a more intense version. The measure is shortened and repeated in 2-beat groups, hemiola-fashion, turning into syncopations leading to the climax of the crescendo. At the same time the foreshortened rhythmic units are supported by an accompaniment more and more highly colored in harmony. At the end of the phrase the earlier complication is counterbalanced by the relaxed expansion of the *sostenuto* into a full cadence on the dominant. Now the accompaniment takes over to effect the transition back to a modified repetition of the opening. This time it is easy to hear the voice as predominant throughout, for the phrases of

# Example 2a



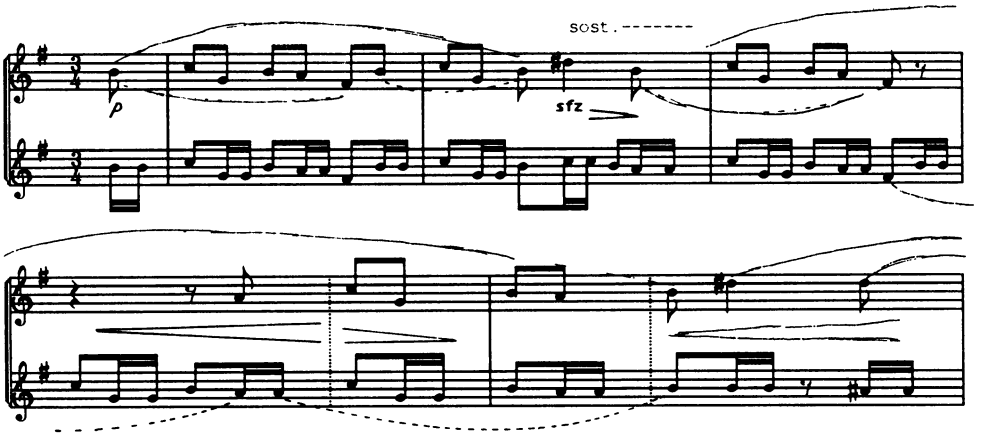
mm. 9-12 are exactly balanced, two by two; besides, Brahms's slurring divides them disjunctly, with no overlap (and no *sostenuto*).

(At this point I must stress that my reading is only one suggestion. Others may find different subdivisions more convincing--e.g., the one indicated by Ex. 2b. In this version, the voice begins a normal repetition, but the accompaniment now initiates the truncation, in which it is rejoined by the voice. Regardless of the exact phrasing chosen, however, I insist that some such articulation is necessary in order to give the theme expressive shape.)

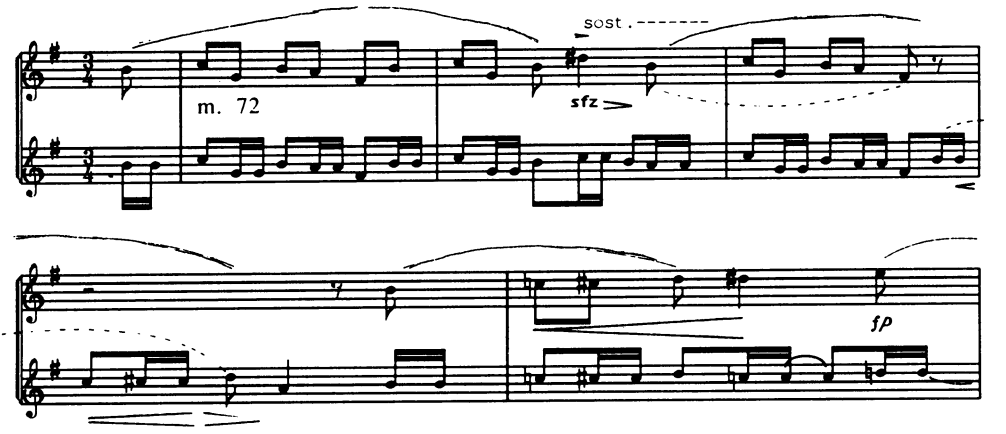
After the *maggiore*, the reprise is condensed at the outset: it begins with the phrase of mm. 9-12, this time extended to 5 measures by a repetition of the chromatic rise. Since the slurring here is similar to that of mm. 9-12, I hear the voice as again initiating the second phrase. The first chromatic rise, however, as the new element of expansion, might represent an interlude; in that case the voice would be pausing before presenting its own version of the rise (Ex. 2c). Another possibility would be to adhere strictly to the piano phrasing and reverse the last two entries. Now the voice uses the chromatics to attempt a modulation, but the accompaniment intervenes to correct any such tendency (Ex. 2d).

If I am right in considering this piece as very intimate, even private, in its expression, the foregoing interpretations will create no problems of performance: the player will merely have to imagine the Schumannesque colloquy. But if one should insist on playing the piece

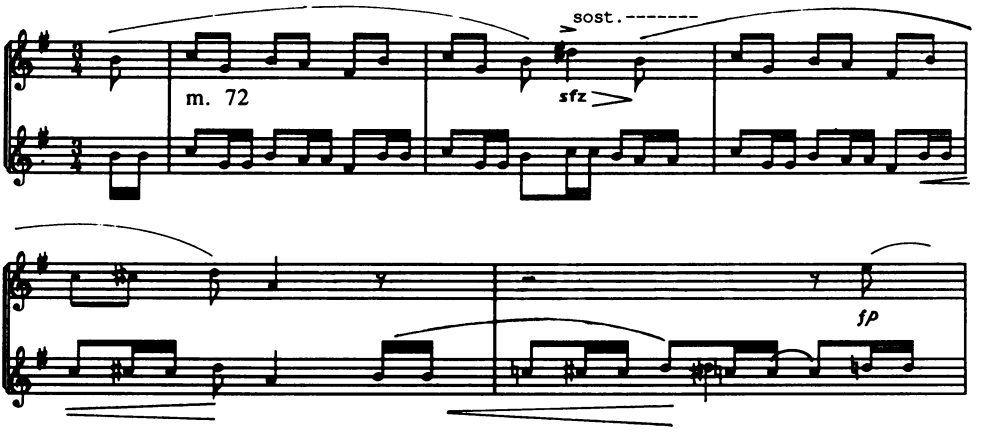
## Example 2b




## Example 2c



# Example 2d



for others, then one must devise some way of projecting the roles involved. That is easy to do in an unsubtle manner, but a masterly performance of this Intermezzo is hard to achieve.

The technique of double articulation, as we might call it, characterizes songs from all periods of Brahms's creative life. It is often extended to cover lengthy sections, and these large-scale examples offer a clue to the understanding and interpretation of the problematic sonata and quartet movements. Sometimes entire songs are thus controlled, even as early as *Anklänge*, Op. 7, No. 3. There, however, the regular vocal phrases (each of 7 measures plus one of rest) and the underlying sections implicit in the accompaniment reinforce one another. Later examples are much more complex. A case in point is *War es dir, dem diese Lippen bebten*, the seventh of the *Magelone* songs, Op. 33, which constantly pits voice against piano. (At m. 16, for example, *Ha! wie Licht* verbally and musically initiates a new vocal phrase; but the piano, even though doubling the melody, seems to begin its own phrase 2 measures later. And at m. 33, the word *strebten* makes a cadence for the voice just as the piano is making a fresh start with the same motive.)

Most germane to my difficulties are those songs that exemplify in the large the pattern of the *Immer leiser* opening: long, relatively unbroken periods in the piano clarified by shorter, punctuated phrases in the voice. *In der Gasse*, Op. 58 no. 6, is one of the most interesting. After a short introduction (mm. 1-6) the piano is given an

unbroken succession of 29 measures. The correct articulation is by no means clear. The harmony suggests beginning with a phrase of 10 measures, extended 4 more by reiteration of the half-cadence. That produces an almost exact balance of 14:15, although the second phrase is hardly an appropriate complement, including as it does 9 measures of repetitive development of a single two-note motive. Moreover, the dynamic indications (*p* becoming *pp* in m. 17) suggest a new start after only 10 measures; thus, 10:19--two phrases highly unbalanced yet now ending in parallel fashion.

What do we find in the voice? Its opening phrase--two lines of verse--consists of 7 measures, followed by 3 of rest. The second pair of lines roughly corresponds to the first as a very free variation, but it is stretched almost beyond recognition into three phrases. Its 7 measures are divided into 4 (the first line) and 3 (the second), with 2 measures of rest between. Then, after another vacant measure, the second line is repeated in a 5-measure version, followed by a final pause of 4 measures.

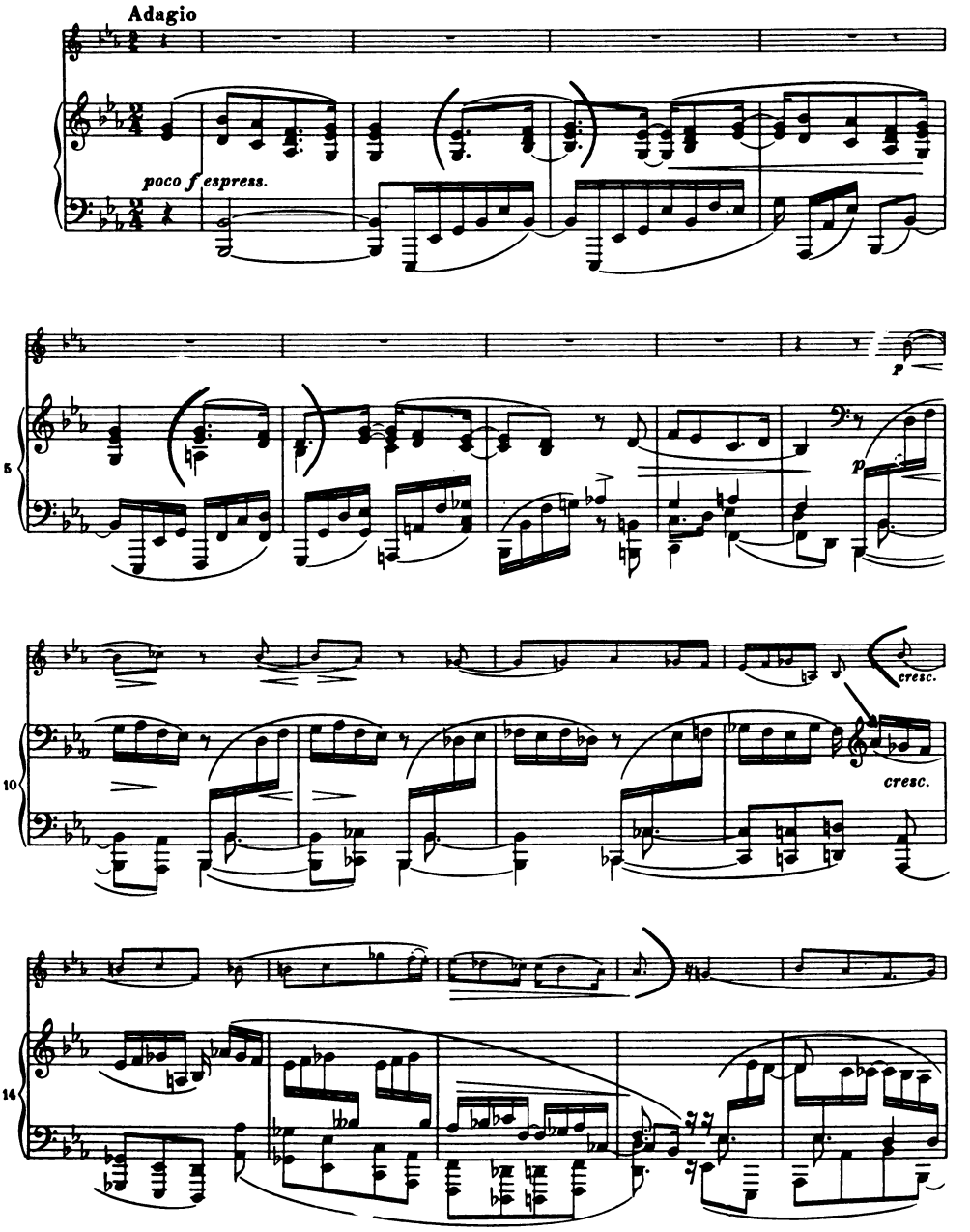
The entire passage can now be heard in proper perspective. The first vocal phrase, with its following silence, matches the opening 10 measures of the accompaniment. The second phrase covers the puzzling 4 measures, now heard as a unit in themselves, yet at the same time as initiating the new, extended variation. The next two vocal phrases give shape to the repetitious continuation of the accompaniment. Finally, the ensuing vocal silence matches the one

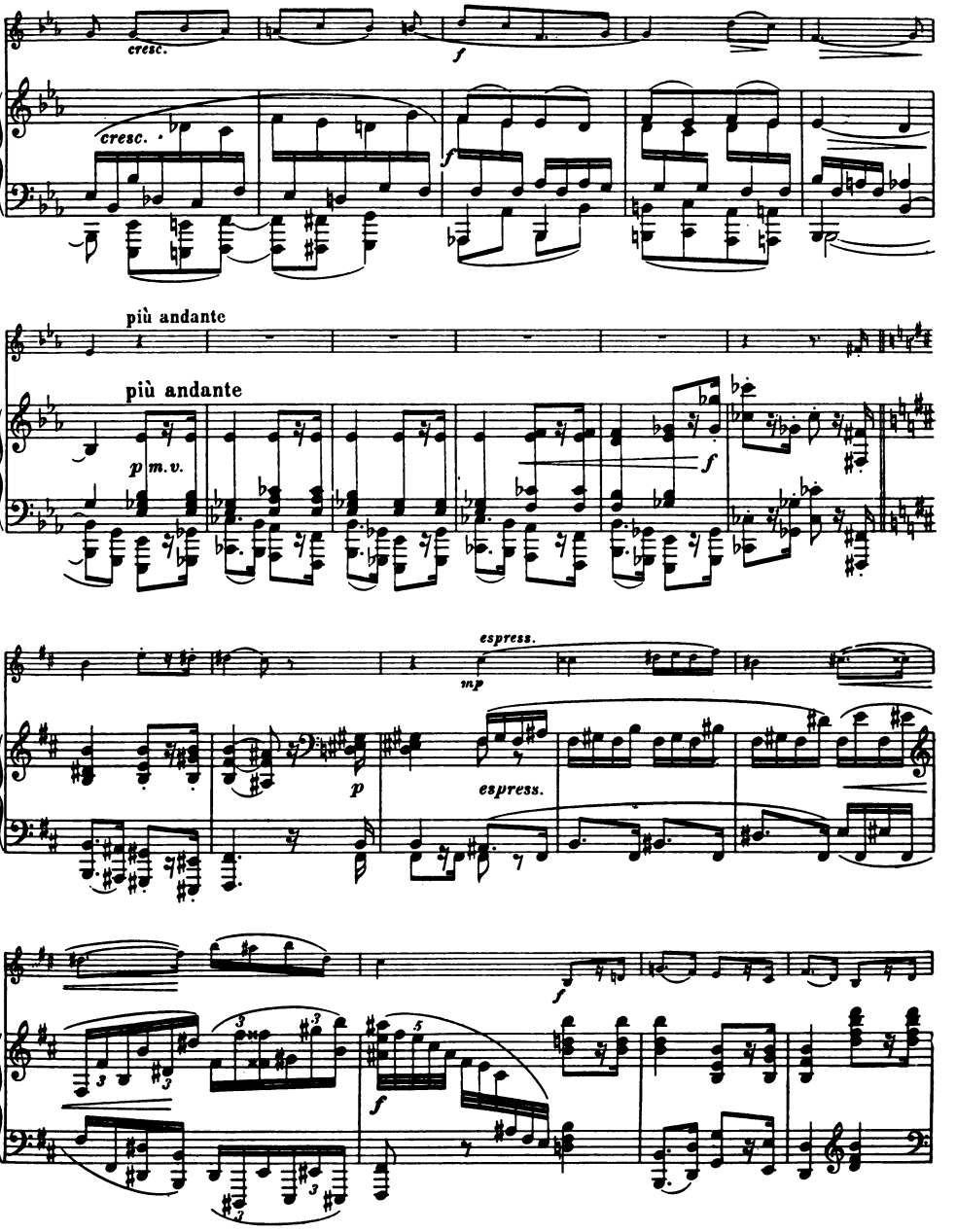
that marked the end of the first phrase, and it is filled in by the piano with the same half-cadence. Thus all uneasiness has been satisfactorily dispelled--because we accept the primacy of the voice and allow it to control the articulation. Equalize piano and voice in the opening of *In der Gasse* and the disquieting ambiguity returns.

That effect can perhaps be heard in simpler, clearer form in the first stanza of *Von ewiger Liebe*, for here the piano melody basically doubles that of the voice. But it is more continuous, filling in the rests that demark the vocal phrases. We need only play the accompaniment, then, to hear, as it were, both parts given equal status. The result is again unsettling. Are the first 4 measures an introduction or an opening statement? The answer is not so obvious as it may seem. And what of the repeated motive that announces the arrival of D minor at mm. 12-15? Is there a phrase-division here? Where? All becomes clear once we accept the predominance of the vocal line: the new phrase enters with the voice, after its rest. The continuous rhythmic pattern of the piano yields to the four distinct 4-measure groups of the voice, introduced by a prelude and punctuated by an interlude.

Songs such as these offer models for the interpretations of the instrumental movements I have questioned. But when we turn to the sonatas, we must resist the obvious equation of violin with voice. Brahms is subtler than that. For instance, the Adagio of the G-major Sonata begins with a piano solo (Ex. 3); yet it is the definitive statement of the first phrase of the theme. If there is an *innere Stimme*,

# Example 3




cresc.
f
19
più andante
più andante
p m.v.
24
f
espress.
mp
30
p
espress.
f
35
f

it has already begun to sing, without waiting for the violin. But what a strange phrase it is, taking leave of its opening motive only with the greatest difficulty, and approaching its cadence with equal reluctance! About 5 measures' worth of material has been spun out into 9. It is easy, however, to translate the melody into a hypothetical vocal line with accompanying interludes. We have only to realize that mm. $3_2$-$5_1$[2] present an expanded repetition of the opening gesture, and all falls into place. The inner melody consists of four partial phrases; a statement in the tonic, an expanded repetition, a move to the dominant, and a cadence. The apparently redundant fragments in mm. $2_2$-$3_1$ and $5_2$-$6_1$ are interludes anticipating in each case the melody to come; the cadence, however, is not so anticipated, but is set off by a short rest.

The violin now enters, bearing the melody of the contrasting section of the song-form, clearly articulated in motives of 1, 1, and 2 measures. But the continuation of the violin seems perfunctory and irrelevant--so long, that is, as one persists in thinking of it as the primary melody. On the contrary: once more the piano bears the chief burden (which, incidentally, is marked *espressivo* on its return in the reprise.) A 4-measure extension and development of the violin's cadence, it represents yet another interlude, to which the violin is playing a discant--hence a discant, oddly enough, not to the "voice" but to its accompaniment. This, the longest interlude so far, prepares for

[2] i.e., from the second beat of m. 3 through the first beat of m. 5.

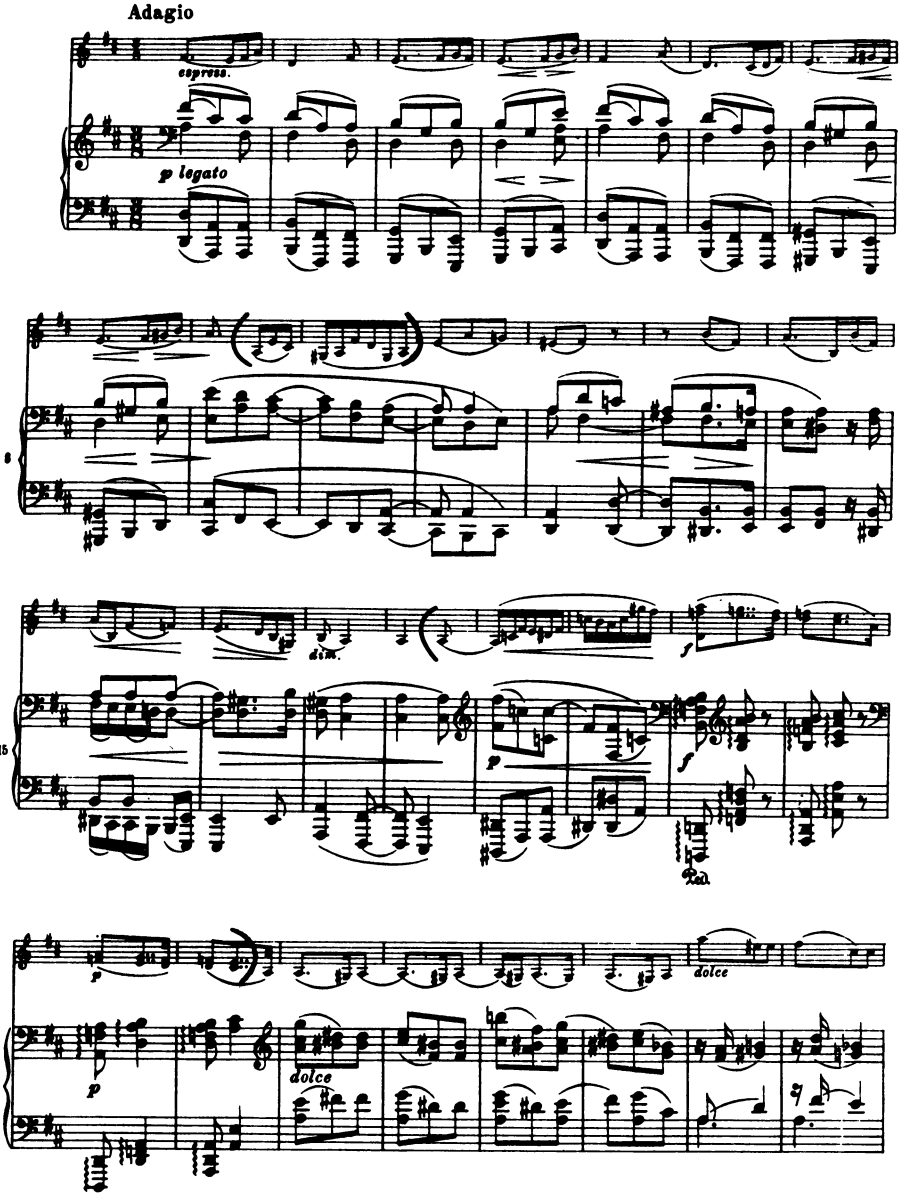
the return of the opening vocal theme, now at last assigned to the violin, and presented in an unbroken phrase cadencing on the tonic.

Unlike the Intermezzo, ensemble works such as this one cannot be played in total privacy. The performers of a violin and piano sonata are at the very least playing for each other. It is therefore crucial that each player be fully aware at all times of his role, and do his best to project it. In the reprise of the Adagio, for example, the violin is given the entire *aba* of the theme; it must adapt itself accordingly.

The Adagio of the D minor Sonata opens up yet another possibility (Ex. 4). I have already mentioned the outbreak of double-stops: how are we to hear it? In neither texture, nor thematic substance, nor range, nor dynamic, does it seem justified by the theme that apparently engenders it; that is why I have accused it of sentimentality. Yet an imaginative interpretation can, I believe, exonerate it of the charge.

Suppose that, instead of hearing the violin as spinning out one long, unbroken lyric, we recognize the passage-work of mm. $9_2$-10 as the abortive stirring of another agent. That agent would then return in m. $18_3$, as the close motivic and registral connections show. What we are witnessing now is a drama: the violin's original song, neatly divided into two phrases of 9 and 8 measures, is interrupted and eventually superseded by another voice. The second voice, apparently impatient with the protagonist's controlled expressiveness, confronts it with an outcry that rises to an impassioned climax. Gradually

# Example 4

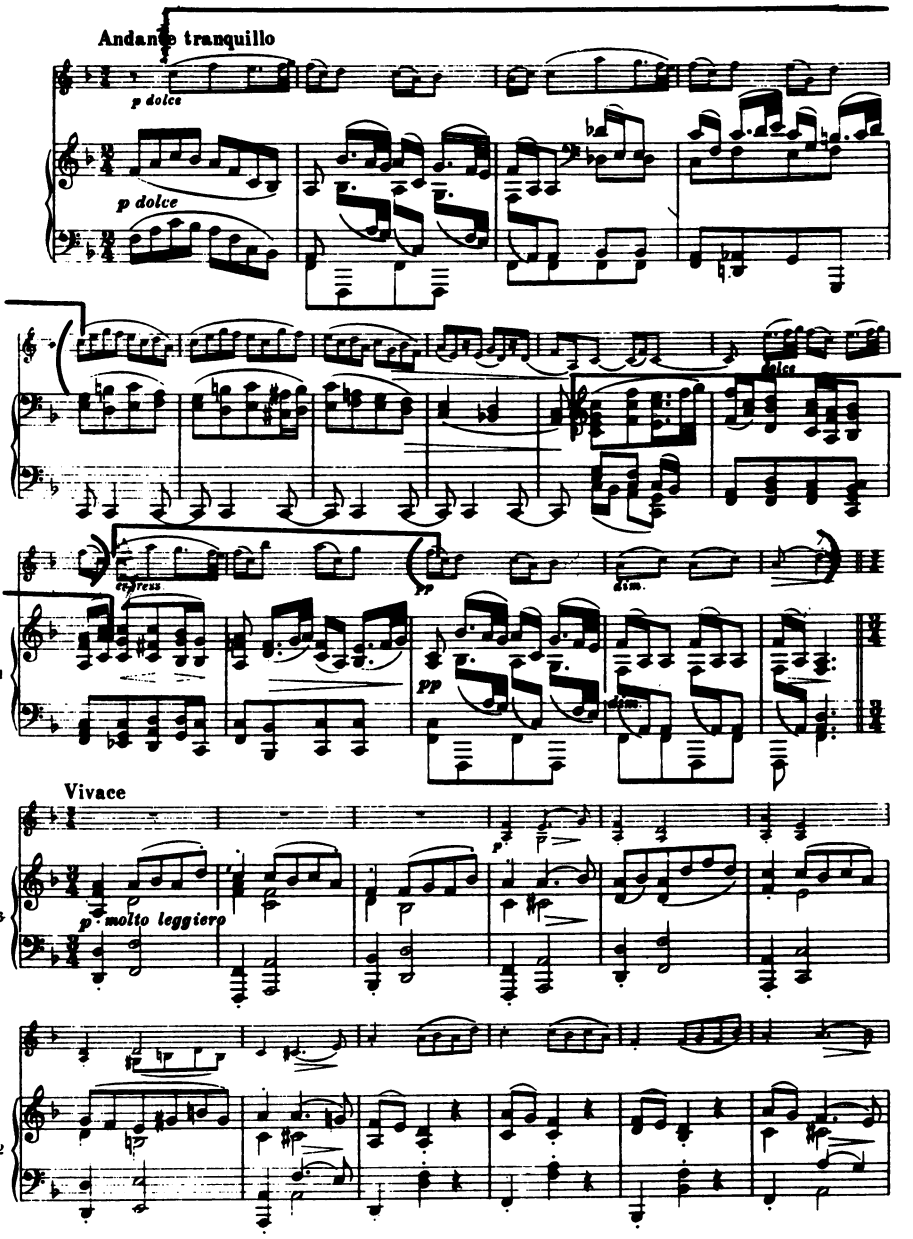


subsiding, it eventually allows the original voice to take over once more.

Such an interpretation is confirmed by the reprise, which doubles both the interruption and the supersession. The former is now sequentially repeated (mm. $41_2$-44); the latter (again connecting motivically and registrally with the interrupting passage) embraces two climactic arches, an outburst followed, as previously, by 4 measures of subsidence (mm. $50_3$-66). Exhausted, the second voice turns the final cadence over to its rival, which elaborates it in one last thematic statement.

The Andante tranquillo of the A major Sonata divides its lyrical content between violin and piano (Ex. 5). Virtually unbroken for 15 measures, the violin's line assumes various roles. The first half is easy to construe: 4 measures of thematic statement plus 4 of pure dominant interlude. (The bowing makes this quite clear by opposing the small motivic units of the theme to the measure-long groups of the interlude.) It is the next 4-measure group that becomes complex. For the first 2 measures the violin must relinquish the song to the piano, first accompanying and then imitating it. Only then (m. 11) does the violin reassume the primacy, as indicated by the replacement of *dolce* by *espressivo*. But that lasts only 2 measures, for the *pp* in m. 13 indicates the commencement of a codetta on the tonic that parallels the earlier interlude on the dominant. The two reprises of this material can be worked out in similar fashion--must be so worked out in

# Example 5

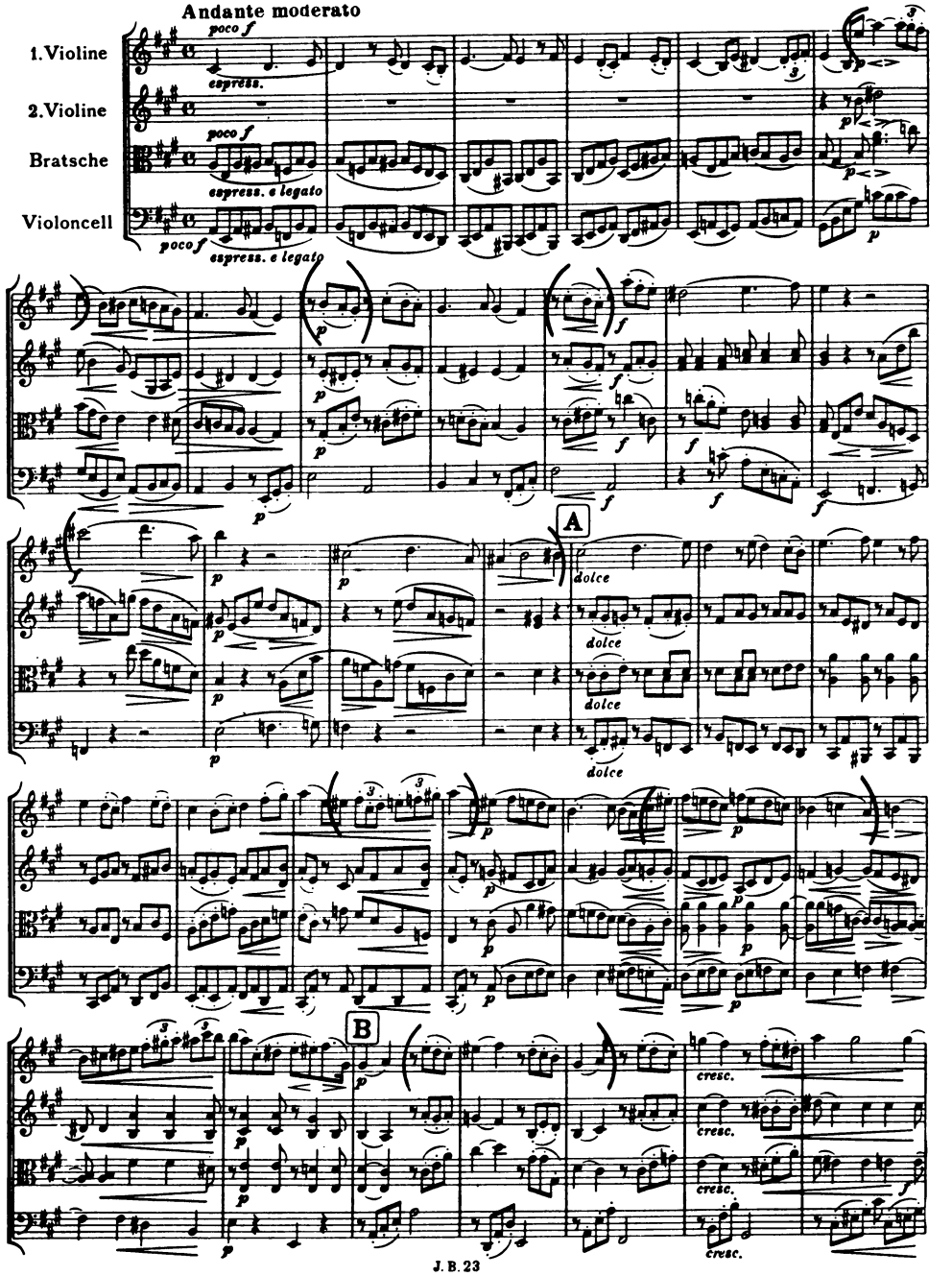

Andante tranquillo
p dolce
p dolce
cresc.
pp
dim.
11
Vivace
p molto leggiero
16
22

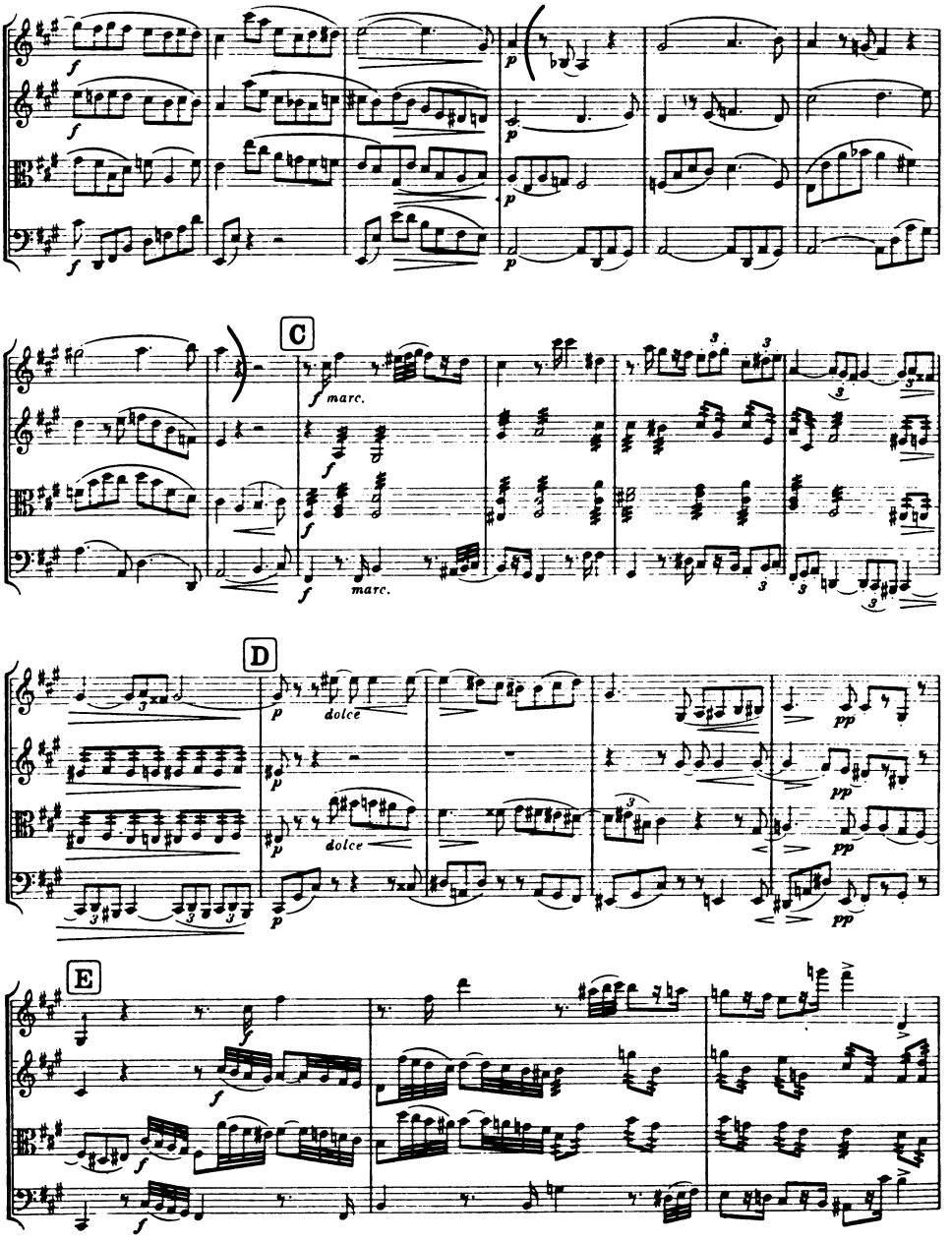
performance, else the listener will become satiated with the continuous violin line.

Similarly, a sensitive performance of the Andante moderato of the A minor String Quartet requires the first violinist to distinguish between song-phrases and interludes (Ex. 6). There may be differences of opinion as to exactly where the divisions should come. For example, the registral and dynamic (*piano*) interruption of m. 6 doubtless signals an interlude, but how long does it last? A first reading might support the view that it continues beyond m. $7_1$, but the sequential connection between mm. 7-8 and 9-10 suggests the contrary. Most likely, the song recommences at m. $7_2$ and continues through m. 13, although interrupted briefly by the motives of mm. $9_{1\text{-}2}$ and $11_{1\text{-}2}$. It is important that such decisions be made firmly during this lengthy antecedent+transition, whose articulations are made easy by rests, dynamics, and contrasts of range; for the same problems arise in a more exacerbated form throughout the much more continuous and less differentiated consequent+codetta (mm. 18-42).

At this point one question may well be asked--in fact, ought to be asked. If Brahms really meant for an *innere Stimme* to be heard, why did he conceal it? Why did he not present it openly as Schumann did? True, he offered clues in the form of phrasing, dynamics, and the like, that may be taken as indicating the presence of an unvoiced song. I have pointed out a number of these, but their paucity and inconsistency might still cast doubt on my hypothesis. On the other

# Example 6


Andante moderato
1. Violine
2. Violine
Bratsche
Violoncell
poco f
espress.
espress. e legato
A
dolce
B
cresc.
J. B. 23


35
C
f marc.
41
D
dolce
47
E
52

hand, indirection and ambiguity are basic to Brahms's style. I need not cite instances of his long-delayed tonics, of his problematic keys, of his phrase-elisions, of his formal complexities: all these have been frequently discussed. The occasional hidden voice would be one more example of his typical subtlety. Moreover, by not specifying its exact outlines he leaves open the possibility of multiple interpretations. My own solutions are meant to be no more than suggestions. It is the task of the private reader to sing inwardly, and of the public performer to project, whatever inner song he may find.