Some remarks on the finale of Brahms's C-minor Piano Quartet – an exercise in hermeneutics

- Vincent CK Cheung¹

You might display a picture on the title page. Namely a head – with a pistol pointing at it. Now you can form an idea of the music! I will send you my photograph for this purpose! You could also give it a blue frockcoat, yellow trousers, and riding boots, since you appear to like colour printing.²

Thus remarked Brahms in a letter to the publisher of his Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60. Any educated German in the late 19th century would recognize this man in blue frockcoat and yellow trousers to be the protagonist of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who commits suicide for his love of a friend's wife. Many program notes writers have thus interpreted this quartet as a musical tragedy of an autobiographical nature, citing the above words as proof of the composer's authorization of such a reading.

While the dramatic first movement, the tumultuous second, and the bitterly sweet third may easily be associated with the fateful ending of Goethe's novel, or Brahms's unrequited love for Clara Schumann (and/or Elisabeth von Herzogenberg?)³, the finale, to many music lovers, has remained an elusive, if not anticlimactic, movement of this quartet. Opinions of the critics on this movement differ widely. Daniel Mason called it one of the "dullest movements"⁴, and Florence May described it as "mechanical."⁵ Donald Francis Tovey, on the other hand, maintained that this *Allegro comodo* is a "great" but "misunderstood" musical tragedy, though he did not further explained why this movement is tragic, noting simply that "the emotions that find their place in great art are tremendous facts."⁶

The purpose of this brief note is to show how this seemingly ineffective finale of Brahms's C minor Piano Quartet can be appreciated as "purely tragic" music. I will point out several musically salient features of this movement, and show how their interrelationships contribute to the unfolding of a musical drama with an ironically tragic conclusion.

1. Presentation of two important motives.

The movement opens with an extended melody played by the violin, accompanied by *moto perpetuo* figures in the piano. The piano part of the first measure includes two motives: G-C-E^b-G-F[#] and G-A^b-F-G, respectively (Ex. 1). I shall call the first group the X motive, and the second, the Y motive. The importance of these two motives in the movement is asserted by sheer repetition – they are jointly presented, in various guises, and always by the piano, for 10 times in the exposition of this sonata-form movement.



Ex. 1. Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60, movement 4, opening (mm. 1-3).

In Ex. 1, it is also noteworthy that the first two notes of the violin melody (G-E^b), as well as the initial repeated notes of the piano part (G-G-G) are both reminiscent of the famous Fate motive in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (G-G-G-E^b). Even before the first measure is completed, one is given a premonition that something fateful will happen.

The exposition then continues with more extended melodies played by the strings, with the piano persistently serving as accompaniment. It is concluded with a chorale melody presented by the string trio, and interrupted between phrases by descending broken octaves in the piano.

2. Uncoupling of the two motives poses a problem.

The long development section begins quietly. Every note here is kept as soft as possible, under Brahms's explicit instruction: *Tranquillo e sempre pianissimo*. But of course, quietude does not imply placidity. The X and Y motives heard in the exposition reappear, but the piano no longer has privilege over them. The Y motive is first presented in doubly augmented form by the cello as the first pizzicato notes of the movement. It is followed by an augmented X motive, played by the viola, and accompanied by a conspicuous descending chromatic scale in the piano (Ex. 2):



Ex. 2. Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60, movement 4, development (mm. 113-127).

If we compare the X and Y motives in Ex. 1 to those in Ex. 2, we see that their order of presentation in the latter is reversed. Furthermore, in the development they are presented by two different instruments, in two different registers, and are subjected to two different scales of augmentation. The X and Y motives, originally coupled in the exposition, are thus uncoupled by Brahms in the development.

The uncoupling of the X and Y motives in the above example is a musically significant event in the movement despite its seeming unimportance. As a consequence of this uncoupling, each of the two motives now demands a harmonic resolution. In Ex. 2, the Y motive (E-F-D-E) naturally resolves to the A major/minor chord, and the X motive (E-A-C-E-D[#]), to the E major/minor chord. Neither resolution is achieved at this point, and instead, the phrase settles on an unstable diminished seventh chord (arrow in Ex. 2). By uncoupling the X and Y motives, Brahms has thus posed a problem for himself in the development: somehow, the music has to evolve with the goal of resolving these uncoupled motives, and of course, as a composer following the footsteps of the Classical giants, he would not have allowed them to be left unresolved by the end of the finale. But at this point, one is not given any clue on under what circumstance, or in what particular mood, these motives would be eventually resolved.

In the remaining measures of the development, the X and Y motives are separately stated for several more times. After some 80 measures of quiet meandering, the music regains momentum. The main theme is played once again by the violin, but in the remote key of B minor. This leads naturally to the recapitulation, which is mostly a verbatim restatement of the exposition. Throughout the development and recapitulation, the piano has faithfully remained to provide only continuous accompanimental figures, creating a melancholic, and sometimes gloomy, mood in which the breathless melodies in the strings unfold.

3. A hope of triumph kindled by the piano.

After the recapitulation, the monumental coda to this *Allegro comodo* is set off by a reiteration of the chorale melody, presented in full *forte* chords by the piano alone, without any support from the strings (Ex. 3):



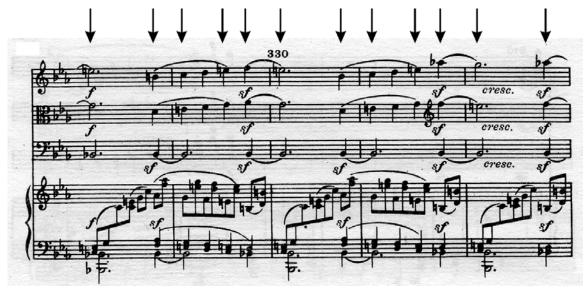
Ex. 3. Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60, movement 4, coda (mm. 300-316).

The passage in the above example might be regarded as the most important moment of the entire movement. Finally, near the end of the piece, the piano transgresses its predestined role of accompaniment by boldly stating a melody. The strings here are relegated to the role of filling in the gaps between the chorale phrases by supplying sequences of falling notes. Suddenly, this outburst in the piano part kindles a hope of a triumphant conclusion, at which the harmonic problem posed by the uncoupled motives (Ex. 2) would be resolved with music as glorious as the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The Romantic hero has at last decided to fight against his ill fate.

4. Problem solved, but hope shattered.

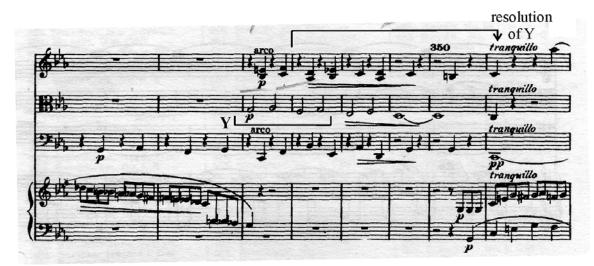
The outburst in the piano part quickly develops into something disastrous, however. After only 11 measures, the original chorale melody is transformed into a series of diminished chords alternating with diatonic

chords. The strings then regain their role of presenting the main melody, though now it is set against some very dissonant harmonies, with augmented fourths (the devil's interval) and minor seconds presented one after another (arrows in Ex. 4):



Ex. 4. Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60, movement 4, coda (mm. 328-332).

This tumultuous and disturbing passage does not last long though. The descending chromatic scale heard in the development (Ex. 2) suddenly reappears, leading also to reappearance of the uncoupled Y motive, presented by the viola (Ex. 5):



Ex. 5. Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60, movement 4, coda (mm. 344-351).

This time, the Y motive is harmonically resolved to the C major chord, as can be seen in the above example. The music then lingers on for some 30 more measures, with the main melody played by the violin, and accompanied by the keyboard. Nevertheless, only fragments of the melody's inversion are left in the violin. The original accompaniment of the piano is transformed into some strange chromatic figures that seem to be set simultaneously in C major and C minor, creating an eerie and mysterious atmosphere. It is obvious by now that the hope of a glorious ending resolving the remaining X motive will never return. At the very end of the piece, the uncoupled X motive, presented by the violin and viola, is finally resolved into the C major chord as well:



Ex. 6. Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60, movement 4, coda (mm. 374-379).

How this *Allegro comodo* movement is a tragedy can now be readily appreciated. To reiterate, in the development the need of harmonic resolution is created by uncoupling the X and Y motives, and not immediately resolving each of them (Ex. 2). Then, as a consequence of the piano transgressing its accompanimental role (Ex. 3), one would expect the harmonic resolution of the X and Y motives to be accomplished by some assertive and victorious passages. What one hears instead, however, is a frighteningly depressing coda, accomplishing the resolution with a disturbingly abrupt cadence (last two measures of Ex. 6). Musically, then, the movement is left unresolved⁸, even though harmonically, every thing is resolved. In the sense that harmonic resolution, expected to be achieved triumphantly, is juxtaposed with an expected but unfulfilled musical resolution, this final movement of Brahms's C minor Piano Quartet is a true tragedy.

But if this movement is intended to be a musical tragedy, why did Brahms end the piece with two C major chords? A hint to this puzzle may be found in Goethe's novel. Werther writes to Lotte, before he shoots himself, that

Albert is your husband – well, what of it? Husband! In the eyes of the world – and in the eyes of the world is it sinful for me to love you, to want to tear you from his embrace into my own? Sin? Very well, and I am punishing myself; I have tasted the whole divine delight of that sin, and have taken balm and strength into my heart. From this moment you are mine! mine, oh Lotte!⁹

Thus, Werther's death at least gives him an opportunity to pretend that he succeeds in conquering Lotte's heart. Perhaps this is what inspired Brahms to end this quartet with an air of irony.

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² Johannes Brahms – Life and Letters, tran. & annot. Styra Avins and Josef Eisinger (Oxford, 1997), p. 484.

³ In fact, Brahms presented the manuscript of the quartet's beautiful third movement to Elisabeth von Herzogenberg as a gift shortly after the quartet's publication. See *Johannes Brahms – Life and Letters*, tran. & annot. Styra Avins and Josef Eisinger (Oxford, 1997), p. 530.

⁴ Daniel Gregory Mason, *The Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms* (New York, 1933), p. 112.

⁵ Florence May, *The Life of Brahms* (Neptune City, NJ, 1981), p. 498.

⁶ Donald Francis Tovey, Essays in Musical Analysis – Chamber Music (Oxford, 1944), pp. 203-205.

⁷ Donald Francis Tovey, *The Main Stream of Music and other Essays* (Oxford, 1949), p. 255.

⁸ I am grateful to Dennis Ming-Yiu Wu for pointing this out.

⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Micheal Huse (London, 1989), p. 128.