

A CASE FOR CIPHERS IN BRAHMS'S 7 *FANTASIEN*, OP. 116

by

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The use of musical ciphers has been well documented in Robert Schumann's music, by the composer and musicologists alike. Similar encipherings, including SCHA (Schumann), Brahms (BAHS), and Chiarina (CHAA), have been discovered in Johannes Brahms's music. Studies to date have focused primarily on Brahms's chamber music, including the Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Op. 8 and the Piano Quartet No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 60. This paper illuminates additional cipher material in Brahms's later solo piano music, particularly in the *7 Fantasien*, Op. 116.

Historical context provides motive for Brahms's use of ciphers, including further cipher material in the *8 Klavierstücke*, Op. 76. Brahms's own intimate knowledge of Robert Schumann's compositional style, as well as his access to the older composer's writings and diaries provides a strong case for his likely use of ciphers.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Love above all else should be
Our theme when we sing;
If it can permeate our song,
The sound will be all the better.” – Goethe¹

These words, copied by the young Brahms into *Des jungen Kreislers Schatzkäflein*², his notebook of artistic inspiration, provide a glimpse into the composer’s heart; while never adopting the programmatic ideals championed by many other Romantic composers, Brahms’s music is deeply emotional, influenced by his full, yet often unsatisfying, life. In 1853, shortly before he copied out this passage, Brahms met the couple who would become two of his greatest inspirations: Robert (1810-1856) and Clara Schumann (1819-1896).³

Robert Schumann’s early influence is apparent in the title Brahms gave his notebook: both composers were deeply influenced by E.T.A. Hoffmann’s (1776-1822) character Kreisler, with whom they related as artists. Though Brahms always retained his

¹*The Brahms Notebooks: The Little Treasure Chest of the Young Kreisler*, trans. Agnes Eisenberger, (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2003), 293.

² The Young Kreisler’s Treasure Chest

³ Biographical information in the Introduction taken from Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 56-74.

own compositional voice and identity, references to Schumann and Hoffmann abound in his *oeuvre*. Brahms's harmonic language, artistic influences, and his occasional use of Schumann's thematic material and ciphers show the enduring effect Schumann had on the younger composer throughout his career.

Clara Schumann's influence takes a subtler shape: a virtuoso performer, she was to become the pianistic inspiration for many of his works. She frequently received the first drafts of Brahms's solo piano compositions and likewise premiered many of his works. Clara's inspiration was also present on another level: as their relationship blossomed, Brahms began to care for her beyond the bounds of typical friendship. While Clara's devotion to her husband apparently suppressed any possibility of a deeper relationship, Clara remained an artistic muse throughout Brahms's life. Regardless of what could have been, Brahms's encounter with Robert and Clara Schumann in 1853 proved to be a turning point in the young composer's career.

Brahms's relationship with the Schumanns did not start out so positively. The teenaged Brahms, with his conservative musical tastes probably inherited from his teacher Eduard Marxsen, found Robert's music far too radical. Luise Japha (1826-1910), a close friend and fellow pianist in Hamburg, was a strong proponent of both Schumann's and Brahms's music. Much to Brahms's dismay, Japha left Hamburg in 1852 to study with the Schumanns in Düsseldorf.

Predating their fateful 1853 meeting, Brahms's first contact with the Schumanns actually occurred in 1850, when the couple visited Brahms's hometown of Hamburg on a concert tour. It is unknown whether Brahms attended any of the concerts, one of which

featured Clara playing her husband's piano concerto, but Brahms did send a stack of his original compositions to Robert's hotel. After the tour, it was returned unopened.

Despite this unpromising beginning, Brahms serendipitously crossed paths with the Schumanns again only three years later. Before embarking on a hiking tour of the Rhine in 1853, Brahms's friend, violinist Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), urged him to stop by the Schumanns' house in Düsseldorf along the way to introduce himself before returning to Hamburg. Brahms was disinclined at first, likely still upset about the incident from 1850 as well as the loss of his friend and advocate Japha to the older composer just one year prior. However, his recent study of Robert's *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16 inspired Brahms to reconsider. Brahms must have felt a kindred spirit within Schumann's work, which was also inspired by Hoffmann's character Kreisler from his novel *Kater Murr*. On September 30, 1853, he approached the Schumanns' house and rang the bell.⁴

Shortly after Brahms's arrival, Robert Schumann's attempted suicide and growing mental instability led to his admittance to the asylum at Endenich. Throughout the entire hospitalization, Clara was not permitted to visit her husband, for fear of upsetting him. The young Brahms acted as a messenger between the two, visiting frequently and conveying news to Clara. He stayed often at the Schumanns' house, helping to raise the children while Clara was away on tours. His place as a student, disciple, colleague, friend, confidant, and helper within the Schumann household afforded him the opportunity to study Robert's compositions and writings firsthand. Robert's use of compositional games, especially ciphers, held particular fascination for Brahms.

⁴ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 56-74.

In this paper, I present analytical evidence to show how Brahms may have used ciphers in the 7 *Fantasien*, Op. 116. Similar structural devices can be found in the 8 *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76, and both compositions can be traced back to earlier composers whom Brahms had studied. Brahms's intimate knowledge of Schumann's music was enriched by his direct access to Robert's compositional manuscripts and other writings.

A Brief History Of Ciphers

A cipher is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a method of transforming a text in order to conceal its meaning; a combination of symbolic letters; especially: the interwoven initials of a name.”⁵ In music, the German language provides more opportunities for enciphering than English does; “B” is the pitch B-flat, while “H” is the pitch B-natural. Though “Es” represents E-flat in German, its pronunciation is “S;” thus, S corresponds to the pitch E-flat.

The first documentation of the use of musical ciphers comes from the 16th century, when Marco Antonio Colonna (1523-1597), the appointed head of the Spanish army, used musically encoded ciphers to indicate the names of dignitaries and geographical locations. Italian scholars, including Matteo Argenti, the official papal cipher secretary in the late 16th century and Giovanni Battista Porta (ca. 1535-1615), further developed the idea during the next century. This culminated in the work of Gustav

⁵ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “cipher,” accessed on April 3, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cipher>

Selenus, who designed a more complex and sophisticated manual for using ciphers, which included the use of transposition and retrograde.⁶

These innovations influenced musical composition in the Renaissance period, and examples of ciphers can be found in the motets of the time. Composers such as Johannes Ockeghem (c. 1410-1497) and Josquin des Prez (c. 1450-1521) also made use of the similarly cryptic-devices of the rebus and *Sogetto cavato*. The former uses pictures in place of letters of words, while the latter matches vowel sounds used in the text with the related pronunciations of solmization syllables. These cryptic pieces paved the way for other composers, including Frescobaldi and Bach, who employed similar devices in their instrumental compositions. The lack of text in these pieces further disguised the musical puzzles within.

In the Romantic period, and of greatest significance to Brahms's compositional development, Robert Schumann was the composer who used ciphers most famously.

Robert Schumann's Use of Ciphers

The first well-known published example of ciphers in Schumann's music is found in his very first opus, *Variations on the Name "Abegg."* The letters A-B-E-G-G form the theme, spelled out clearly at the beginning (**Figure 1**). In addition to dedicating the work to a real person, Pauline von Abegg, Schumann also dedicated the work to a fictitious friend-of-a-friend, Meta Abegg.⁷

⁶ Katelijne Schiltz, *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 347-348.

⁷ Christopher Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion: Context and Content in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 121.

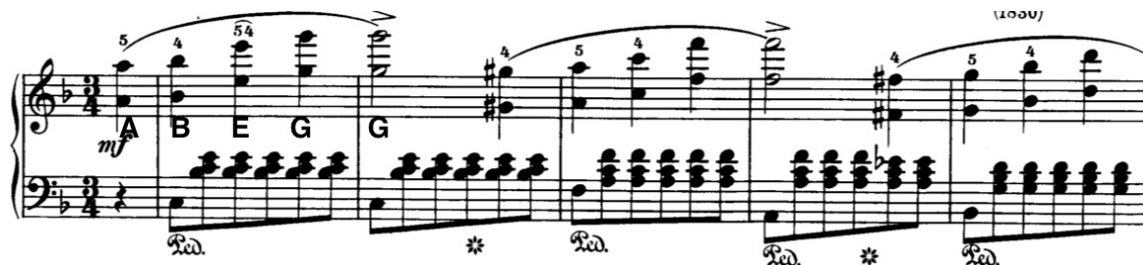


Figure 1: Robert Schumann, *Variations on the Name “Abegg,”* Op. 1, mm. 1-5

Another oft-cited example is from Schumann’s *Carnaval*, Op. 9, subtitled “Little Scenes on Four Notes.” The four notes, A-S-C-H, appear in different guises and with various extra-musical meanings. The piece, which predates his romance with Clara, was inspired by his then-fiancé, Ernestine von Fricken, who was born in Asch. The cipher can be understood as either a reference to von Fricken’s hometown, or as a reference to Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, which follows the season of Carnival. Between the eighth and ninth pieces, Schumann inserts a piece titled “Sphinxes,” which, using archaic notation, spells out the three forms of the cipher that appear throughout the work: S-C-H-A, Ab-C-H and A-S-C-H. The first spelling, S-C-H-A, also happens to be the cipher for Schumann’s own name. The second spelling is derived from the German spelling of von Fricken’s hometown, Asch (As-C-H). Schumann described the work by saying “deciphering my masked ball will be a real game for you.”⁸

A third instance of enciphering occurs in Schumann’s *Album for the Young*, Op. 68 (**Figure 2**). In “Nordic Song,” Schumann includes the cipher, G-A-D-E, as a nod to Danish composer Niels Gade (1817-1890). Schumann had previously remarked about

⁸ Julia Beate Perrey, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Schumann*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72.

Gade's musical name, saying, "Let no one ignore this little sign of higher favor."⁹

Because his name consisted entirely of musical pitches, Schumann considered Gade very special among composers; only Bach, whom Schumann revered, could claim the same.



Figure 2: Robert Schumann, “Nordic Song,” *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, m. 1

Brahms was influenced by Schumann's use of various ciphers, including those from *Carnaval*, Op. 9, which appear in Brahms's Op. 76 No. 4 and are further explained in Chapter 2.¹⁰ Most relevant to this study, however, are the cryptograms designed by Robert Schumann for Clara. Robert's nickname for Clara, Chiarina, yields the musical pitches C-H-A-A. These pitches are present in the piano's opening solo of Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54, a work which Clara frequently performed. (**Figure 3**).

⁹ Robert Schumann, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld, *On Music and Musicians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946), 169.

¹⁰ Oliver Neighbour, "Brahms and Schumann: Two Opus Nines and Beyond," *19th Century Music* 7, no. 2 (1984): 268.



Figure 3: Robert Schumann, Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54, m. 12

An additional transposed version of this cipher appears in Schumann’s Symphony No. 4 in D Minor, Op. 120, called the “Clara symphony” by the composer in the original 1841 version of the work (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Robert Schumann, Symphony No. 4 in D Minor, Op. 120, mm. 26-32

This version of Clara’s cipher, henceforth called the “Clara motive” in this paper, contains the pitches C-B-A-G#-A, or C-Bb-A-G#-A.¹¹ Later in his life, Brahms had a copy of this symphony in his personal library and he was clearly familiar with the work.

Eric Sams further explained the Clara motive in a collection of articles from the 1960s and 70s. Sams’s argument, which concludes that the “missing” letters from Clara’s

¹¹ David Brodbeck, “Two: The Brahms-Joachim Counterpoint Exchange; or, Robert, Clara, and ‘The Best Harmony Between Jos. And Joh.’,” *Brahms Studies* 1 (1994): 70-71.

name are derived through stepwise motion, also draws from the devices of cryptology found in *Kryptographik* (1809) by Johann Klüber (1762-1837). A book known to be in Schumann's personal library, it provides supporting evidence for ciphers in addition to the pitch patterns in the scores.¹²

Brahms's years in Düsseldorf at the Schumanns' home provided ample opportunity to study and explore Robert Schumann's works. Here, Brahms became fully immersed in Schumann's compositional games.

The Use of Ciphers by Other Composers

Though Brahms's cipher usage was certainly inspired and developed through his close study of Robert Schumann's music, he had been exposed to this compositional technique before meeting the Schumanns. Brahms was familiar with cipher usage throughout his development as a composer through a combination of interactions with friends and colleagues as well as an intensive study of earlier masterworks.

Brahms's piano teacher from his formative years, Eduard Marxsen, had composed a piece making use of the cipher C-A-F-F-E-E, inspired by his favorite drink: the *Fantasie 'alla moda' über den Kaffee* appeared in 1831.¹³

In 1851, while still living in Hamburg, Brahms appeared on a concert with Niels Gade. Gade, whom Schumann had referenced three years prior in his *Album for the*

¹² Eric Sams, "A Schumann Primer?" *The Musical Times* 111, no. 1533 (1970): 1096-1097; Sams, "Brahms and His Clara Themes," *The Musical Times* 112, no. 1539 (1971): 432-434.; Sams, "Brahms and His Musical Love Letters," *The Musical Times* 112, no. 1538 (1971): 329-330.; Sams, "Did Schumann Use Ciphers?" *The Musical Times* 106, no. 1470 (1965): 584-591.

¹³ William Drabkin, "Marxsen, Eduard," *Grove Music Online*. 7 Apr. 2018.
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000017959>.

Young, was well-known for including ciphers of various guises in his works, particularly those of his own name. Gade had written two works the decade before that employed ciphers: *Drei kleine Clavierstücke*, Op. 2, and *Sonata für Pianoforte und Violin*, Op. 6, both composed in 1842. Op. 6, which was dedicated to Clara Schumann, makes use of the G-A-D-E cipher in retrograde (E-D-A-G) in the second movement. In Op. 2, Gade combines two ciphers: G-A-D-E and B-A-C-H. The “Bach” in this case refers not to J.S. Bach, but to the dedicatee, Oluf Bachlin. In 1852, one year after the concert with Brahms, Gade composed another work in which his cipher was present: *Symphony No. 5*, Op. 25. G-A-D-E appears in the first movement.¹⁴ Though it is unknown which works appeared on the joint concert, the topic of compositional ciphers could certainly have come up in conversation between the two composers.

Joseph Joachim, the friend who had originally urged Brahms to meet Schumann, was also interested in the use of ciphers in composition. In the 1850s, Joachim developed the cipher, F-A-E, which stood for *frei aber einsam*, or “free but lonely.” In 1853, Joachim began including this cipher as part of his signature in entries of Brahms’s notebook, *Des jungen Kreislers Schatzkästlein*.

That same year, Brahms, Schumann, and Schumann’s pupil Albert Dietrich collaborated on a musical gift to Joachim, which came to be known as the “F-A-E Sonata,” for violin and piano. Schumann assigned Dietrich to write the first movement. Already a master of the genre, with the publication of his well-received Scherzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 4, Brahms contributed a scherzo as the third movement while Schumann composed the second and fourth movements. Ironically, Brahms’s contribution does not

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion*, 120-122.

include a single F-A-E-cipher, but instead draws on material from Dietrich's first movement.¹⁵

In addition to the F-A-E cipher, which was likely inspired by his lovesickness for Gisela von Arnim, Joachim frequently employed a cipher in his compositions that directly referenced Gisela, whose name can be divided into the syllables Gis-e-la. Musically, this translates to G#-E-A. Gisela's cipher is, intervallically, the inversion of F-A-E, which consists of an ascending major third followed by descending perfect fourth (Figure 5).

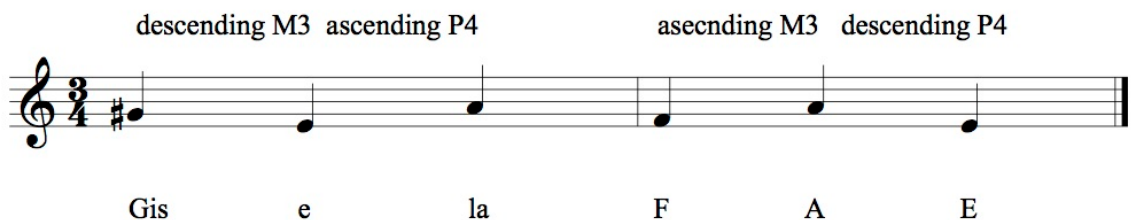


Figure 5: Gisela and FAE Cipher Comparison

In 1856, Brahms and Joachim exchanged contrapuntal exercises by mail. Their exercises frequently included the abovementioned ciphers of F-A-E and Gis-e-la. Throughout the exchange, Bach's influence is obvious and referred to directly. Joachim's second correspondence included a fugue with subjects and answers on B-A-C-H. In his correspondence from April 27, 1856, Brahms included several canons on subjects from Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, and additionally assigned Joachim the task of writing a canon on the same subject.¹⁶

¹⁵ Michael Musgrave, "Frei aber Froh: A Reconsideration," *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 3 (1980): 255-256.

¹⁶ Brodbeck, "The Brahms-Joachim Counterpoint Exchange," 6.

In addition to observing his friends' use of ciphers in their work, Brahms would have also come across numerous examples of ciphers and structural games in his studies of repertoire by earlier composers. Brahms was a learned musician, and acutely aware of his position in history. From a young age, Eduard Marxsen instilled in him a love and appreciation of works by Bach and the Viennese classical composers. As a pianist, he performed pieces by Baroque and Classical composers in addition to his own compositions and those of his contemporaries. Alongside studying the music of Schumann and his disciples faithfully, Brahms owned a large and varied collection of scores that included works from the standard Classical canon.¹⁷ Brahms also owned and studied scores by Baroque and pre-Baroque composers. Employed as a conductor for various organizations and institutions, including the Hamburg Women's Chorus, *Wiener Singakademie*, and the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*, Brahms regularly programmed and conducted Renaissance and Baroque works alongside Classical masterworks.

¹⁷ Geiringer, "Brahms as a Musicologist," *The Musical Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1983): 465.

CHAPTER II

JOHANNES BRAHMS'S USE OF CIPHERS

Documented Ciphers

A number of scholars have discussed Brahms's use of ciphers, mostly unrelated to the Clara ciphers. However, Eric Sams and Michael Musgrave have written about the use of the Clara motive in three pieces: the Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Op. 8, the Piano Quartet No. 3 in C Minor,¹⁸ Op. 60, and the Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68.¹⁹ Jan Swafford has noted that in the Prelude and Fugue in A minor, WoO 9, the fugue subject is highly similar to the Clara motive. The entire motive appears in the bass during the fugue's climax, at mm. 42-43 (**Figure 6**).²⁰

¹⁸ Sams, "Brahms and His Clara Themes," 432-434.

¹⁹ Michael Musgrave, "Brahms's First Symphony: Thematic Coherence and Its Secret Origin," *Music Analysis* 2.3 (1983): 117-133.

²⁰ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 157.



Figure 6: Brahms, Fugue in A Minor, WoO 9, mm. 42-43

While the use of Clara ciphers in Brahms's works is not widely documented, his use of various other ciphers is well known. At least four other ciphers are known to have been employed by Brahms, including F-A-E, A-G-A-H-E, F-Ab-F, and B-A-H-S. The significance of these ciphers is explained below.

The history of the F-A-E motive, coined by Joachim, has been documented above. Brahms used this cipher in the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5. The motive was surely intentional, as this work was composed in 1853, the same year in which Joachim coined and frequently used his cipher-motto. Coincidentally, this was also the only work in which Brahms received guidance from Robert Schumann during the compositional process. While the second and fourth movements to the sonata had already been composed by the time Brahms showed up on the Schumanns' doorstep, the cipher appears in the fifth movement, composed a few years later. It can be found in the second theme, mm. 39-40 (**Figure 7**).²¹

²¹ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 97.



Figure 7: Brahms, Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5, V. mm. 39-40

In addition to Joachim's well-known FAE cipher, Kalbeck states that Brahms created his own, related cipher: F-A-F, sometimes appearing as F-Ab-F or F#-A-F#, which represented his motto, *frei aber froh*, or "free but happy."²² The opening of Brahms's Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90 draws heavily on this motive (**Figure 8**).²³

²² Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 2nd edition. (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1908-16), 98.

²³ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 486.

Symphonie Nr. 3

(F dur)

für großes Orchester

Johannes Brahms, Op. 90
(Veröffentlicht 1884)

Allegro con brio

2 Flöten
2 Oboen
2 Klarinetten in B
2 Fagotte
Kontrafagott
4 Hörner
2 Trompeten in F
3 Posaunen
Pauken in F. C
1. Violine
2. Violine
Bratsche
Violoncell
Kontrabaß

Allegro con brio

J. B. 3

Figure 8: Brahms, *Symphony No. 3 in F Major*, Op. 90, I. mm. 1-6

It is also found, in its F#-A-F# form, in the Ballade, Op. 10 No. 2 for solo piano (Figure 9). Though most scholars have accepted this as an additional known cipher in

Brahms's oeuvre, Musgrave and Drinker cast doubt upon Kalbeck's authority and the opus 10 cipher's authenticity.²⁴



Figure 9: Brahms, Ballade, Op. 10, No. 2 mm. 1-2

Brahms is also known to have used the cipher for his own name, B-A-H-S, in his works. This appears clearly in the Fugue, WoO 8, which originated from Joachim and Brahms's counterpoint exchange of 1856. Despite the work's tonic of A-flat minor, Brahms manages to use all four pitches within the first four notes of the subject (**Figure 10**).

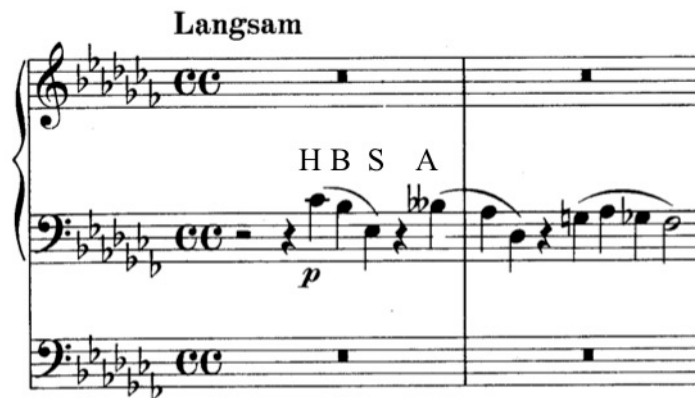


Figure 10: Brahms, Fugue, WoO 8, mm. 1-2

The most well-known cipher used by Brahms was A-G-A-H-E, inspired by Agathe von Siebold (1835-1909). Brahms met von Siebold in Spring of 1857. They

²⁴Musgrave, "Frei aber Froh," 257-258; Henry Drinker, *The Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms* (Philadelphia: Elkan-Vogel Co., 1932), 96.

became close friends, and in 1859, were engaged. Despite the fact that Brahms broke off the engagement later that same year, she was a musical inspiration for him during these and the following years. The String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 36 contains the most famous example of her cipher, found in the first movement, mm. 163-168 (**Figure 11**).²⁵

6 (50)

8.....A G A H E.....

Figure 11: Brahms, *String Sextet No. 2 in G Major*, Op. 36, I. mm. 163-176

Other A-G-A-H-E appearances occur in Brahms's lieder, including "Vor dem Fenster" and "Gang zur Liebsten" from Op. 14, and also "Und gehst du über den Kirchhof" in Op. 44. Though the Agathe ciphers are rarely questioned, the text used by Brahms during the cipher statements creates an even stronger case for the inclusion of ciphers. One example is found in "Gang zur Liebsten," when the text states "in the evenings, I cannot go to sleep." These textual references raise the possibility of Brahms's use of ciphers as a cathartic device. Indeed, in a letter to Joseph Gänsbacher (1778-1844), Brahms wrote, "By this work [Op. 36], I have freed myself of my last love." It is only a

²⁵ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 292.

logical conclusion, then, that Brahms would have used Clara's ciphers for similar, cathartic reasons.²⁶

The Use of Ciphers in the 8 *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76

Oliver Neighbour documents Brahms's use of an unordered Schumann cipher (S-A-H-C) in mm. 1-2 of Op. 76, No. 4 (**Figure 12**).²⁷



Figure 12: Brahms, *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76 No. 4, mm. 1-2

In an unpublished paper, David Korevaar identifies a further cipher statement that occurs later in the same piece. Prefaced by the Schumann cipher, Brahms's own name (B-A-H-S) is enciphered at the retransition, mm. 31-32 (**Figure 13**). In addition to the two cipher statements, the entire set exhibits a recurring tritone motive, present in each movement at a significant moment in the form.



²⁶ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, 292.

²⁷ Neighbour, "Brahms and Schumann," *19th Century Music* 7, no. 3 (1984): 268.

Figure 13: Brahms, *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76 No. 4, mm. 30-32

During Op. 76's composition, in 1878, Brahms had been working with Clara on a republication of Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*, Op. 9, and though they had likely remained in his consciousness since the 1850s, the ciphers and sphinxes would have been fresh in Brahms's ears once again. Just as during the process of writing Op. 76, Brahms had been in contact with Clara during the composition of Op. 116. In September of 1892, on Clara's birthday, Brahms sent one of the most bitter letters that exists between the two. He was likely upset at Clara for choosing to exclude some of his edited versions of Robert's works from the recent Complete Schumann Edition. However, the anger was short-lived, and Brahms soon after sent Clara eleven original solo piano pieces for review, to which she responded enthusiastically. These would become parts of Op. 116, Op. 117, and Op. 118. In December of the same year, Brahms posted a nostalgic letter inspired by Christmastime and reminiscences of years past.

In addition to his continuation of editing Robert Schumann's compositions, Brahms was also revisiting E.T.A. Hoffmann's works at the time he was composing Op. 116.²⁸ Just as Robert Schumann's use of ciphers in Op. 9 had been fresh in his mind during the composition of Op. 76, Brahms would have been brought back to this earlier, Kreisler-inspired world while composing Op. 116. Even the title of Op. 116, "Fantasien," is reminiscent of Schuman's use of "Fantasiestücke" for a number of compositions,

²⁸ Leon Botstein, *The Compleat Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*, (New York: WW. Norton & Co, 1999), 187.

which was inspired by Hoffmann's use of the word in his essays.²⁹ Indeed, Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16 was subtitled "Fantasie" by the composer.

Perhaps these associations remained with Brahms all along, despite the 14-year absence from solo piano composition. Op. 116 can be viewed as Brahms simply picking up where he left off. Many details are similar: Brahms returned once again to Schumannesque sets of piano miniatures, rather than large-scale structures; despite the traditions of the period, which rarely saw performances of full works, the set was meant as a cohesive unit; and the pieces all contain generic titles of either "capriccio" for the fast pieces or "intermezzo" for the slower ones. Thus, the cipher material and structural devices found in Op. 116 can also be viewed as a logical progression from Brahms's compositional process in Op. 76.

²⁹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

CHAPTER III

A CASE FOR CIPHERS IN BRAHMS'S 7 *FANTASIEN*, OP. 116

Cyclic Motives and Developing Variation

Before investigating the possible use of ciphers in the 7 *Fantasien*, Op. 116, a brief survey of Brahms's treatment of cyclic form in the context of the technique of developing variation is useful.

According to Max Kalbeck, Brahms's first biographer, Brahms described Op. 116 as an intentionally cyclic work. The thematic material in Op. 116 can be understood as consisting of four cyclic motives. Examples, derivations, and transformations of the motives exist in all seven pieces. A wealth of academic material now exists showing the motivic interconnectedness within the seven pieces.³⁰

On a larger scale, the presence of cyclic motives and their transformations in Op. 116 also shows Brahms's use of developing variation, a term coined by Arnold

³⁰ Edward T. Cone, "Attacking a Brahms Puzzle," *The Musical Times* 136, no. 1824 (1995): 72-77; Jonathan Dunsby, "The multi-piece in Brahms: *Fantasien* Op. 116," in *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary, and Analytical Studies*. ed. Robert Pascall, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 167-191; William Kinderman, "'Capricious Play': Cyclic Relations in Brahms's Op. 10 and *Fantasien* Op. 116," in *Bach to Brahms: Essays on Musical Design and Structure*. ed. David Beach and Yosef Goldenberg, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 115-132.

Schoenberg to describe a technique considered to be a hallmark of Brahms's late style. In works that use the technique of developing variation, great significance is given to the opening measures which present what Schoenberg called the *Grundgestalt*, in which the composer presents all of the basic material.

The *Grundgestalt* principle can be readily seen in the set's cyclic motives. Take, for example, the motive that opens the fourth piece. This motive is categorized by three half steps (B-B#-C#) embedded inside a descending Perfect 5th (B-E) (**Figure 14**).



Figure 14: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 4, m. 1

Another descending 5th (G#-C#) in the first melodic gesture of the piece follows this opening descending 5th. Later, this motive is fleshed out into a descending scalar pattern that spans a 5th. D# to G# provides the first 5th, followed by E to A (**Figure 15**).

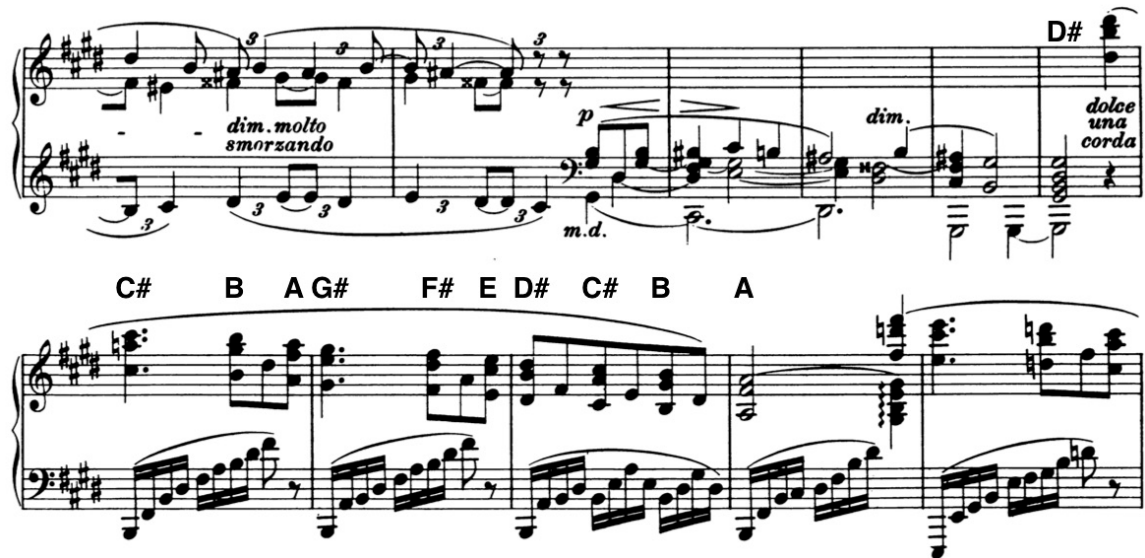


Figure 15: Brahms, *Fantasiens*, Op. 116 No. 4, mm. 32-42

In addition to transforming motives within and between pieces, Brahms frequently foreshadows a motive's entrance by first introducing it in a more primitive form. For example, the motive in **Figure 14** taken from the fourth piece makes an initial covert appearance in the first piece (**Figure 16**).



Figure 16: Brahms, *Fantasiens*, Op. 116 No. 1, mm. 75-82

As we will see in the next sections, Brahms uses the technique of developing variation in similar ways with his cipher statements. The *Grundgestalt* principle remains, as Brahms often introduces elements of later cipher statements in unassuming ways.

Ciphers in the Intermezzo, Op. 116 No. 2

While Clara-related ciphers occur throughout the 7 *Fantasien*, Op. 116, they are most prominent in the second piece, Intermezzo. This is in part due to the tonic of A minor, which occurs only in this piece in this opus. A minor lends itself naturally to three prominent Schumann ciphers, as defined in examples above: C-H-A-A (Clara cipher); C-H-A-G#-A (Clara motive); and S-C-H-A (Schumann).

The form of the Intermezzo is described succinctly as a four-part structure: ABA'A. With its $\frac{3}{4}$ meter and Andante tempo, the outer sections resemble a sarabande. The B section shifts to $\frac{3}{8}$, though Brahms sustains the tempo and character by indicating that the previous quarter note equals the new dotted quarter note. Thus, the form can be viewed as a type of sarabande with trio structure. The compositional technique of developing variation accounts for the many small- and large-scale changes and elaborations of the melody throughout. In A', these changes culminate in an A Major section whose resemblance to the main theme is found only in phrase structure, rhythm, and accompaniment.

The CHAA motive appears first and most frequently, embedded in the melody of mm. 2-3 (Figure 17).



Figure 17: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 2, mm. 1-3

In these opening measures, Brahms emphasizes the minor-3rd span between A and C as a harmonic interval, and then filled in with B-natural (H) as a passing tone in the upper voice. Immediately after the melodic statement of C-H-A-A in mm. 2-3, C and A are echoed, without the passing tone. Brahms also introduces the distinctive D-sharp in the tenor voice, a chromatic tone associated with the cipher for Schumann (S-C-H-A).

With this passage, Brahms also seems to prepare us for further versions of the ciphers. This may account for the D-sharp in the tenor. We also might notice that a C-H-A-A motion occurs inside the top two voices of the right hand. The inner voice here also introduces G#, which materializes later as the Clara motive. Finally, Brahms's use of slurs in the right-hand serves to disguise the ciphers here. Schoenberg's concept of developing variation would likely suggest that these latent details are externalized and developed more prominently as the piece unfolds.

In the B section, CHAA motives are found in mm. 22-23 and its repetitions (**Figure 18**).

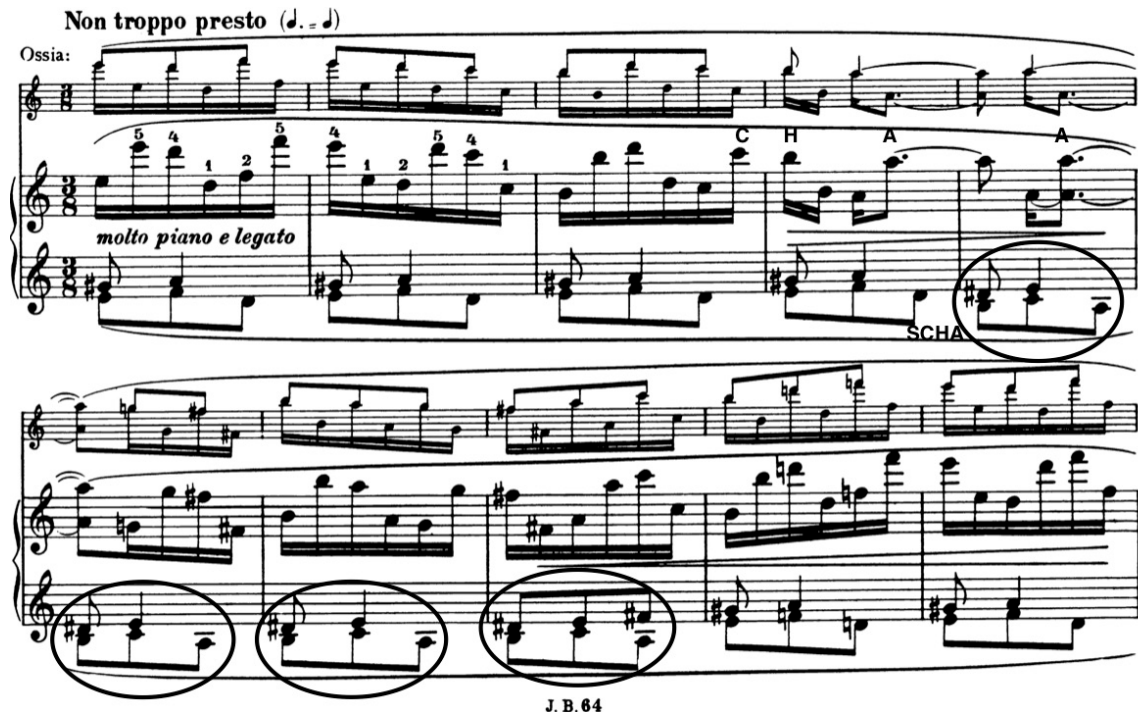


Figure 18: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 2, mm. 19-28

These examples differ from those of the A section in that they are augmented, are set apart by octave, and occur as phrase endings. Combined, these three characteristics make the ciphers clearer and more obvious than those contained within the A section. They also contain special meaning in that they occur simultaneously with statements of the S-C-H-A motive.

The S-C-H-A motive appears in the left-hand accompaniment of mm. 23-26 and mm. 33-36 where the material repeats (**Figure 18**). For a full statement of the cipher, one must consider both up- and down-stemmed pitches. Brahms's use of the harmonic third in this left-hand passage is significant. The opening of the piece, with its abundance of Clara ciphers within melodic and harmonic thirds, suggests that we should associate the interval with Clara, even when the passing H is absent.

As if to emphasize this point, the C-H-A-A and S-C-H-A motives overlap in mm. 23 and 33. This overlap seems deliberate, as part of Brahms's scheme of using a five measure phrase structure throughout most of the trio section. While the right-hand melody adheres strictly to the abnormal phrase length, the left-hand accompaniment seems to anticipate the next phrase, changing harmonies one bar earlier than one might anticipate, based on the right-hand melody. The result is a brief overlap between motives.

The final motive that appears in the second piece, the Clara motive, is the first of several ciphers that Brahms places at strategic moments in the formal design of each piece. It can be found in the up-stems of the left-hand in mm. 41-44, which is near the midpoint of the piece (**Figure 19**). More significantly, it is also an important transitional part of the form, effectively creating a retransition back to the A' section.



Figure 19: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 2, mm. 39-44

Additional Ciphers and Their Developments in Op. 116

As seen in the second piece, the A minor tonality tends to be a marker for cipher occurrences. Though the second piece is the only one in the set to be based primarily in A

minor, the tonality also occurs briefly in the first and fifth pieces. Through the technique of developing variation, Brahms later transforms the material found in these A minor sections in the sixth and seventh pieces.

The A minor section in the first piece is found during mm. 67-82 of the development. All of the necessary pitches required for both of the Clara cipher and motive are found in mm. 71-73, though the repetition of As and octave changes make the cipher difficult to discern visually (**Figure 20**).



Figure 20: Brahms, *Fantasiens*, Op. 116 No. 1, mm. 67-74

A similar Clara cipher statement occurs, this time marked clearly through double-stemming and elongated note values, in mm. 7-9 of the seventh piece (**Figure 21**).

Though now in D minor, Brahms's choice of harmony allows for C-natural, the flatted leading-tone and B-natural, the raised 6th scale degree. By double-stemming these notes, Brahms makes it clear that these pitches should be brought out, further emphasizing both the cipher material as well as the underlying counterpoint. The descending stepwise bass line (D down to A) supports a series of 6/3 sonorities in the upper voices, with the C-natural at the downbeat of m. 7 functioning as a suspension. Thus, the Clara cipher (C-B-A-G#-A) can be considered the main melodic material, supporting the passage of parallel 6/3 chords. with the F-E-D-C# line functioning as a descant line.

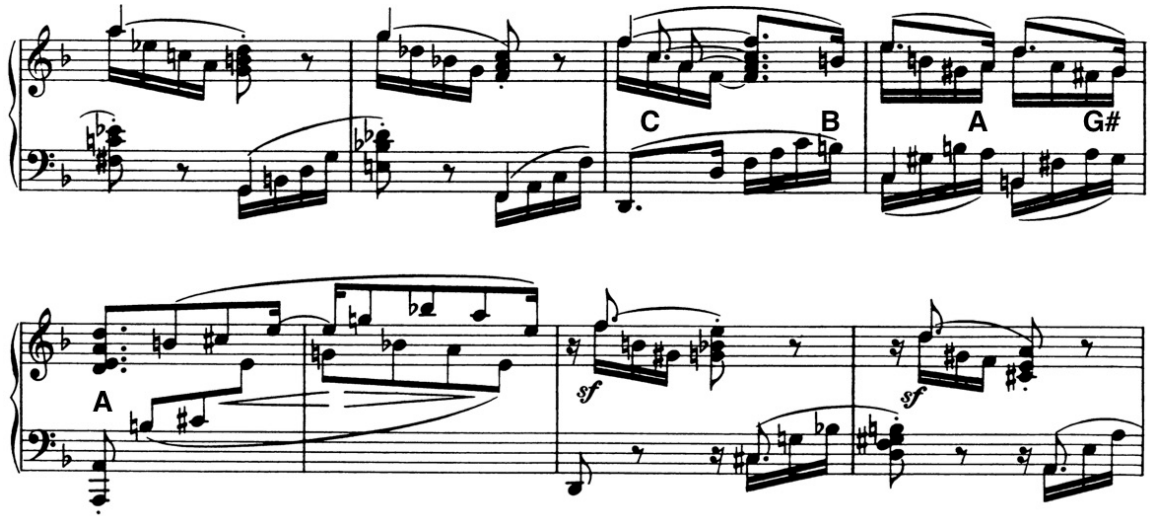


Figure 21: Brahms, *Fantasiën*, Op. 116 No. 7, mm. 5-12

This same passage is further developed in mm. 16-19, where the double-stemmed notes again provide the pitches necessary for the Clara motive: C-B-A-G#-A (Figure 22). As in Figure 21, the reading of the Clara motive as melody in this passage is supported by its harmonic structure: C is supported by F major 5/3 in m. 16, is suspended into m. 17, and then the 7-6 resolution initiates the descending parallel 6/3 sonorities that support B, A, G#, on the way to A in root position at m. 19.



Figure 22: Brahms, *Fantasiën*, Op. 116 No. 7, mm. 13-20

By preparing the key and introducing melodic material, these two statements in the seventh piece lead naturally into a third Clara cipher, found at the beginning of the B section, mm. 21-22. In these measures, the alto melody opens with a statement that could be interpreted as either a partial Clara motive (**Figure 23**) or as C-H-A-(A) (**Figure 24**). Additionally, Brahms includes a D-sharp in the following subphrase, implying S-C-H-A, which interrupts the Clara cipher/motive to finish the statement.

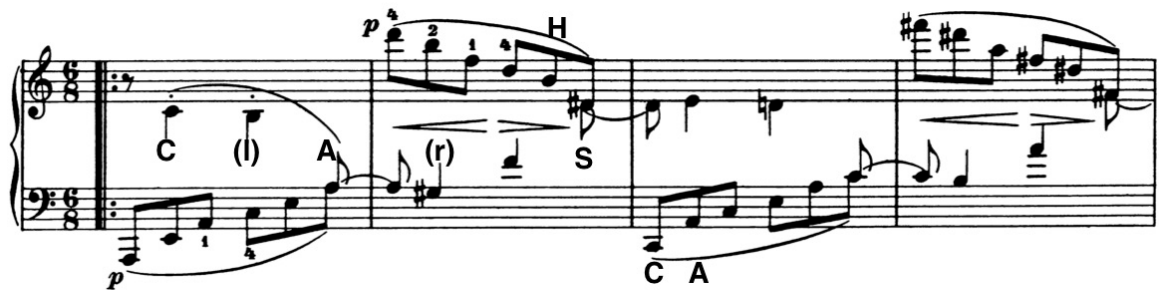


Figure 23: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 7, mm. 21-24 as “Clara motive”

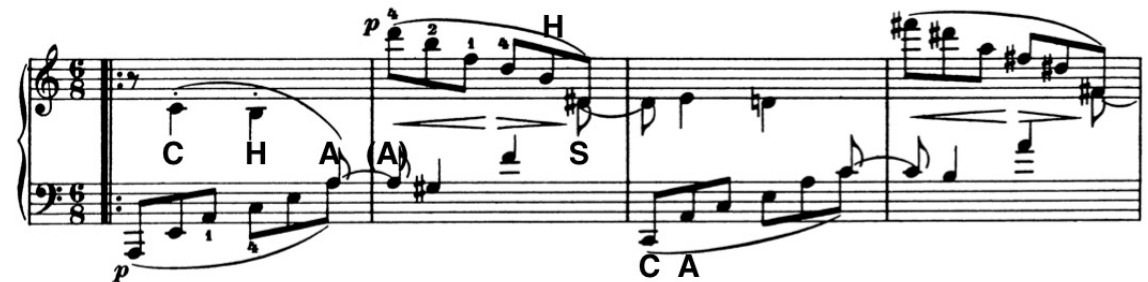


Figure 24: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 7, mm. 21-24 as CHAA cipher

Another brief CHAA motive appears in mm. 47-48 of the seventh piece (**Figure 25**). As with the other pieces, the cipher statement occurs at an important transitional moment in the structure. These two measures occur at the very end of the B section, which tonicizes A minor. Mm. 47-48 provide a Picardy third, shifting the tonic to A major, which serves as a dominant, ultimately propelling the piece back into its original tonic of D minor.



Figure 25: Brahms, *Fantasiens*, Op. 116 No. 7, mm. 47-48

In the fifth piece, the only Clara cipher statement similarly occurs at an important moment in the form, in mm. 23-24, which is repeated immediately after, in mm. 25-26. The addition of the D-sharp in the alto also seems to imply the cipher S-C-H-A. As with the second piece, the cipher occurs during the transition between the B and A' sections (Figure 26).



Figure 26: Brahms, *Fantasiens*, Op. 116 No. 5, mm. 22-25

A particularly striking cipher statement closes the fifth piece. In the context of the E minor tonality, Brahms nevertheless works the Clara motive into the concluding cadence (Figure 27). Though the voice leading slightly obscures the cipher, Brahms recalls the exact register of the Clara motive from the A minor Intermezzo, simplifies the rhythm and texture, and presents the remaining pitches in order, incorporating G-sharp, which is necessary for the final tonic resolution. The contrast between the first and second endings further highlights the Clara cipher in this passage. The chromatic inflections in the first ending, particularly A-sharp, send the music back to the B major of

m. 13. When A-natural replaces A-sharp in the second ending, the backward connection to the Clara motive is all the more apparent in the final cadence.

The striking conclusion also serves a pivotal function in the multi-movement structure of Op. 116 as a whole. By reminding us so vividly of the Clara motive from the second movement, the fifth piece serves as a large-scale retransition into the sixth piece, which recapitulates many of the cipher motives from the fourth piece.

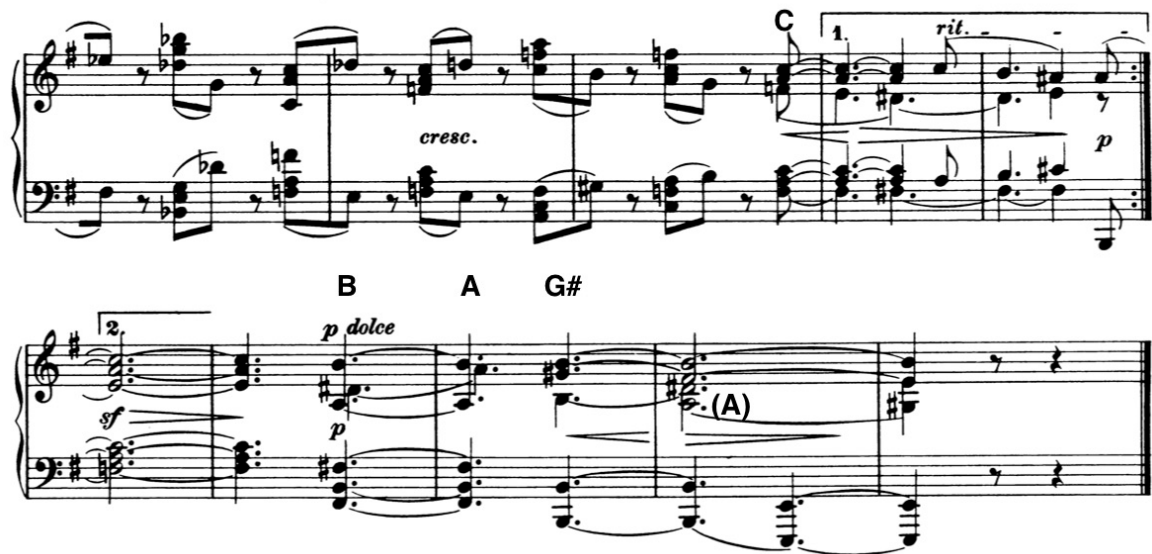


Figure 27: Brahms, *Fantasiens*, Op. 116 No. 5, mm. 34-43

The final development of cipher material occurs between the second and sixth piece. **Figure 19**, reprinted below, shows the inclusion of the Clara motive in the second piece, spelled this time as C-Bb-A-G#-A. At that point, the implied tonic is D minor, which accounts for the inclusion of B-flat. In the sixth piece the same motive is included in the left-hand of m. 52. Though the piece is in the key of E major, Brahms manages to write an F dominant seventh chord at this point, resulting in the inclusion of the same pitches from the second piece (**Figure 28**).



Figure 19: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 2, mm. 39-44



Figure 28: Brahms, *Fantasien*, Op. 116 No. 6, mm. 51-54

In Figures 20, 21, 22, 26, 27, and 28 Brahms's use of the F major harmony to preface the cipher statements is striking and recalls his *Frei aber froh* (F-A-F) motto.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Brahms's knowledge of earlier composers provided him with a wealth of influence throughout his compositional career, from his early interactions with Robert Schumann, to his extensive study of composers from the Renaissance, Baroque and Classical periods, as evidenced by his considerable library of musical scores. He was known to have used ciphers in his works to depict himself, close friends, and lovers. In at least one letter, he described this as a cathartic process, purging himself of unfulfilled desires. It is logical, then, to assume that he would have done the same with the woman with whom he was involved for the longest period: Clara Schumann. Though they apparently determined not to pursue an intimate relationship together shortly after her husband's death, his love and admiration for the older woman did not wane. They remained in close contact throughout their lives until Clara's death in 1896, less than one year before Brahms's own. Partly due to her abilities as a pianist, she remained his musical muse and inspiration.

Because ciphers can also be found in Op. 76, Op. 116 falls in a logical progression in Brahms's late compositional development. Significantly, Brahms draws attention to the otherwise intimate device of encipherment through structural clues in both works.

In the end, because we will never know the composer's true thought process or intentions, any speculation of undocumented ciphers is merely a hypothesis. However, as Brahms copied from Novalis as his first entry in *Des jungen Kreislers Schatzkasten*, "Hypotheses are nets, only he will catch who fishes; Was not America discovered by hypothesis? Long live hypothesis, it alone remains, eternally new, no matter how often it defeats itself."³¹

³¹ *The Brahms Notebooks*, 1.

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