

Brahms Symphony 1

I will take a number of short extracts from this piece and comment on each.

1. 1st Movement: Bars 1-37

The first comment that must be made is on the tempo of the opening section. It is marked *Un Poco Sostenuto* - i.e. a little sustained. It is strange to begin a piece like that because it suggests the *Sostenuto* is in relation to something that has gone before! However Brahms wrote this introduction quite some time after the following *Allegro*, and it seems likely therefore that he is suggesting that this opening is a little sustained compared to the following section. I have heard it argued from this premise that the *Allegro* can be (say) dotted crotchet = 100 and the opening is quaver = 80. But why would Brahms think of the pulse changing from 2 in a bar to 6 in a bar? Surely it is more likely that the whole should be in 2. That could mean something like 90 for the *Allegro* and the opening could then perhaps be taken at (dotted crotchet) 60. To most people that know this work that tempo will verge on the shocking, as it is often taken in the range of quaver = 70 - 90 (i.e. less than half that speed). But to me it makes the best sense of the evidence we have.

2. 1st Movement: Bar 1

Until I looked at the score I had no idea that the contra bassoon and double basses play this heavy repeated C - it usually sounds like a timpani solo! A little balancing work needs doing here.



3. 1st Movement: Bars 9-10

This relates to the figure in the *Allegro* at 51ff. This latter is slurred implying a diminuendo (reinforced by a written *dim* in the recap at 358ff). Therefore I would suggest this works best with a crescendo in the first three pizzicato notes in each bar, that is the ones in the first violins. (*Pace* Gunther Schuller in his generally excellent essay on this piece in 'The Compleat Conductor', who appears incapable of considering the second beat of the bar being stronger than the first, despite bars 358ff).



4. 1st Movement: Bars 38ff

The *Allegro* doesn't need to go too fast. We are in C minor, with some definite allusions to Beethoven's fate motif (first found in the horns at 46f). In fact when Brahms himself said that 'The music is not exactly charming' I reckon he was thinking of this movement. Every note must tell.



5. 1st Movement: Bars 53ff

This, again, is a reflection of 11ff. Therefore I consider that the long note should be fully slurred to the following quaver and only then is there an articulation. Often there is an articulation either side of the quaver, thus negating the very clear resolution onto that note, and also the clear connection to bar 11 in the opening section. See, for example, the clarinet parts:



6. 1st Movement: Bars 114-117

A nice simple example of tension/resolution in the woodwind. The first chord needs playing slightly louder than the second.



7. 1st Movement: Bars 188f

Sorry, but I like this repeat! When you first hear this the first time bar is a real jolt (the second time bar is a much more natural harmonic progression) - and who would want to miss out such a jolt? It has even been suggested that Brahms should have written a D natural to soften the blow! Just looking at the bass part below you may wonder what I'm on about, but just try playing an Eb minor chord followed by octave Cs ...



8. 1st Movement: Bars 273-320

Often this section receives a large slowing down to about bar 294 and then a large speeding up to bar 320. This takes away all the tension created by the repetitive bassline up to bar 289 (the fate motif), and then the chromatically ascending sequence after that. I'm not advocating a rigidly strict tempo, but keeping a fairly steady pulse allows the music to move forwards much more powerfully.



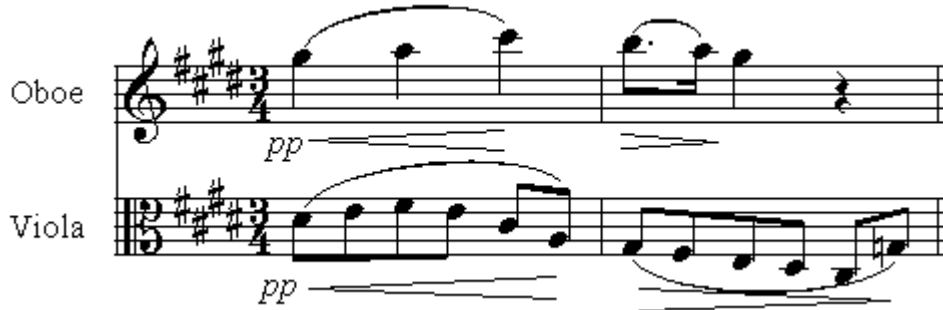
13. 2nd Movement: Bar 34-6

Brahms' use of slurs here implies phrasing. In other words the second of each pair of semiquavers is not played through, thus producing a slightly syncopated effect. I would also apply that to the slur over the quavers in the second bar. In general I think that the principle of playing slurs as phrasing marks should be employed throughout the symphony - though (of course!) there are a number of exceptions.



14. 2nd Movement: Bar 67

At the rather surprising recapitulation of the main theme Brahms writes a *tutti pianissimo*. The violins and violas have a beautiful and melifluous line in 3 octaves which must be especially soft or it will easily overshadow the tune in the woodwind.



15. 3rd Movement: Bars 1-5

The beautiful and serene clarinet tune which opens this movement comes in two five-bar phrases. I would therefore not want to rush into bar 6. Later it comes in seven-bar phrases, and the same logic would apply.



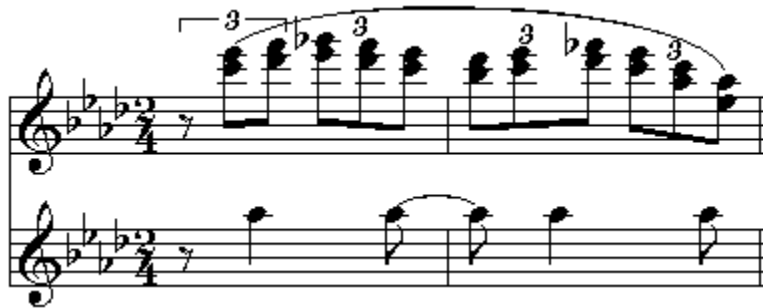
16. 3rd Movement: 71f

In the trio section Brahms consistently writes a dotted crotchet in the repeated pattern, but only a crotchet in the downwards arpeggio. This difference is worth observing.



17. 3rd Movement: 156f

Just to note Brahms' love of different subdivisions of the beat - here 2 against 3. At no point do these notes sound together.



18. 4th Movement: Bars 28f

Tempo is again an issue in this movement. One plausible solution can be inferred from the timpani part which joins the *Adagio* and *Piu Andante* sections. It would seem odd if the twelves in the first bar shown below are not the same speed as the sixes in the following bar. Hence old quaver = new crotchet. This would make a pulse of about 72 for quavers in the *Adagio*, followed by 72 for crotchets in the *Piu Andante* seem reasonable. There's a fair bit more to it than I've said, but that gives us at least a good starting place.



19. 4th Movement: Bars 6ff

In many performances these bars are almost inaudible! Piano when applied to pizzicato needs taking with a pinch of salt.



20. 4th Movement: Bars 61ff

In this Beethoven 9 inspired tune there are two things to get right. Firstly it is *poco forte*, not *forte*. And secondly phrasing is required. Specifically the phrases (in bars) are 4 + 4 + 8. Particularly in the eighth bar the D should resolve more softly to the C followed by a small breath before the bottom G.



