

The Interplay of Coincidence and Intention in Brahms's Piano Quartet no. 1 in G minor, op. 25, Third Movement

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ABSTRACT – As numerous scholars have observed, the young Johannes Brahms demonstrated a strong interest in creating connections between the pieces that make up a larger collection. Related to this interest is the ironic phrase, “the capricious play of coincidences,” which derives from a literary work that Brahms knew well – E. T. A. Hoffmann’s 1819 novel, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. This phrase suggests that the events in the cat’s life are not merely random or whimsical twists in the plot, but rather, that they are meaningful. As musicologist William Kinderman has argued, the phrase also applies to Brahms’s collection, in which musical events “on closer inspection, often reveal themselves to be anything but accidental.”

This study analyzes the third movement of Johannes Brahms’s Piano Quartet no. 1 in G minor, op. 25, focusing on how Brahms creates a web of thematic, harmonic, and formal connections both within the movement and across the entire quartet. Rather than being mere “capricious coincidences,” this study argues that Brahms’s compositional procedures are, in fact, intentional choices that contribute to the deep, underlying coherence of the entire work. Unusually positioned after the scherzo-type second movement, the third movement adopts an unconventional ternary form which resembles a trio-scherzo-trio structure, thus referencing the scherzo form. Through an examination of Brahms’s motivic development in the third movement, it is shown that the thematic material, particularly the opening theme, is intricately interwoven, revealing a deep motivic unity. Additionally, Brahms’s integration of harmonic gestures, tonal relationships, and subtle allusions to *style hongrois* connect the third movement to the rest of the quartet. This study concludes that the third movement’s unconventional compositional choices are not arbitrary, but intentional, hence fostering meaningful connections within and across movements and contributing to the organic unity of the quartet.

Keywords: Brahms, Piano Quartet op. 25, motivic connection, unity.

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1. Introduction

As numerous scholars have observed, the young Johannes Brahms demonstrated a strong interest in creating connections between the pieces that make up a larger collection. Related to this interest is the ironic phrase, “The capricious play of coincidences,” which derives from a literary work that Brahms knew very well – E. T. A. Hoffmann’s 1819 novel, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. This phrase suggests that the events in the cat’s life are not merely random or whimsical twists in the plot, but rather, they are meaningful. As musicologist William Kinderman has argued, the phrase also applies to Brahms’s collection, in which musical events “on closer inspection, often reveal themselves to be anything but accidental.”¹

Illustrating the interplay of coincidence and intention is Brahms’s Piano Quartet no. 1 in G minor, op. 25, which was conceived in 1859 while Brahms was employed at the small court of Detmold, and completed in Hamburg in 1861. Table 1 lists all of Brahms’s slow movements – highlighted in grey are all the ternary form slow movements; in rose pink are Sonata/Ternary hybrid; and finally the two in green are somewhat ambiguous – some scholars call them extended ternary form while others call them rondo. This familiar work’s third movement is undoubtedly one of Brahms’s most unusual *Andante* movements. Spanning a length of 235 measures, the third movement of the Quartet is the longest ternary movement among Brahms’s ternary-form slow movements,² or the second longest ternary movement depending on whether we decide to call the first movement of Horn Trio a rondo or an extended ternary form. A majority, eleven out of sixteen of them, are between 93 and 134 measures long.

Op. no.	Genre	Movement no./ Tempo designation	Form	No. of measures
op. 1	Piano Sonata	II. Andante	Theme and Variations	85 measures
op. 2	Piano Sonata	II. Andante con espressione	Theme and Variations	85 measures
op. 5	Piano Sonata	II. Andante espressivo – Poco più lento – Andante molto – Adagio	Ternary form with coda	191 measures
		IV. Intermezzo. Andante molto	Song-form	53 measures

¹ Kinderman, “‘Capricious Play’: Veiled Cyclic Relations in Brahms’s Ballades op. 10 and Fantasies op. 116”, 115.

² Sisman, “Brahms’s Slow Movements: Reinventing the Closed Forms”, 85.

Op. no.	Genre	Movement no./ Tempo designation	Form	No. of measures
op. 8 (first version)	Piano Trio	III. Adagio non troppo	Modified ternary form with extended closing section	157 measures
op. 11	Serenade	III. Adagio non troppo	Sonata form	250 measures
op. 15	Piano Concerto	II. Adagio	Ternary form with coda	103 measures
op. 16	Serenade	III. Adagio non troppo	Sonata/Ternary hybrid	93 measures
op. 18	String Sextet	II. Andante, ma moderato	Theme and Variations	159 measures
op. 25	Piano Quartet	III. Andante con moto	Ternary form with coda	235 measures
op. 26	Piano Quartet	II. Poco Adagio	Expanded ternary form (ABA'B'A')	155 measures
op. 34	Piano Quintet	II. Andante, un poco Adagio	Ternary form	126 measures
op. 36	String Sextet	III. Poco Adagio	Theme and Variations	87 measures
op. 40	Horn Trio	I. Andante	ABA'B'A''	266 measures
		III. Adagio mesto	ABA'B'A''	86 measures
op. 51 no. 1	String Quartet	II. Romanze – Poco Adagio	Ternary form with coda	96 measures
op. 51 no. 2	String Quartet	II. Andante moderato	Modified Ternary Form AB(c)A'(c')	124 measures
op. 60	Piano Quartet	III. Andante	Sonata/Ternary hybrid	122 measures
op. 67	String Quartet	II. Andante	Ternary form	95 measures
op. 68	Symphony	II. Andante sostenuto	Ternary form with coda	128 measures
op. 73	Symphony	II. Adagio non troppo	Sonata/Ternary hybrid	104 measures
op. 77	Violin Concerto	II. Adagio	Ternary form	116 measures
op. 78	Violin Sonata	II. Adagio – Più andante – Adagio come prima	Ternary form with coda	122 measures
op. 83	Piano Concerto	III. Andante	Ternary form	99 measures

Op. no.	Genre	Movement no./ Tempo designation	Form	No. of measures
op. 87	Piano Trio	II. Andante con moto	Theme and Variations	170 measures
op. 88	String Quintet	II. Grave ed appassionato – Allegretto vivace – Presto	ABA'B'A'', alternating slow and fast sections	208 measures
op. 90	Symphony	II. Andante	Sonata/Ternary hybrid	134 measures
op. 98	Symphony	II. Andante moderato	Varied Sonata form without development	118 measures
op. 99	Cello Sonata	II. Adagio affettuoso	Ternary form with varied return	71 measures
op. 100	Violin Sonata	II. Andante tranquillo – Vivace – Andante – Vivace di più – Andante – Vivace	ABA'B'A'' form, alternating slow and fast sections, resembling a “double rondo” form	168 measures
op. 101	Piano Trio	III. Andante grazioso	Ternary form	109 measures
op. 102	Double Concerto	II. Andante	Ternary form with coda	118 measures
op. 108	Violin Sonata	II. Adagio	Binary form, with statement and expanded counterstatement	75 measures
op. 111	String Quintet	II. Adagio	Sonata/Ternary hybrid	80 measures

Table 1. List of Brahms's slow movements.

2. Third movement, *Andante*

In order to demonstrate that certain features of this movement are anything but “the capricious play of coincidences,” my article will address four points of analysis: First, I will briefly point out the position of this movement within the entire quartet; Second, I will mention some atypical characteristics of this movement; Third, I will highlight motivic links within the movement; Last but not least, I will demonstrate the underlying connections of the third movement with other movements of the Quartet. These four points, put together, will demonstrate that the web of connections within the

third movement and their relationships with other movements are plausibly intentional, and not a mere play of capricious coincidences.

2.1. Position of this movement within the entire quartet

The position of this *Andante* movement within the entire quartet is unusual: it follows rather than precedes the scherzo-type second movement. Prior to this piano quartet, Brahms had used the same order in his Piano Trio no. 1 op. 8 and his Serenades opp. 11 and 16, and he would do so again in his String Sextet no. 2 op. 36, Horn Trio op. 40, Piano Quartet no. 3 op. 60, Piano Concerto no. 2 op. 83, Piano Trio No. 3 op. 101, and Clarinet Sonata op. 120 no. 2. Commenting on Brahms's ordering of movements in a large number of works, Basil Smallman notes that "the placing of the slow movements in relation to their scherzo-type fellows is not a matter of whim, but one of obvious importance to the expressive scheme of each work as a whole."³ In the case of his First Piano Quartet, the second movement was designated as an *Intermezzo*, and it takes the same ternary form as a typical scherzo movement. Smallman thinks that the melancholic *Intermezzo* serves as a suitable backdrop for the luscious and spacious manner of the ensuing *Andante* third movement.⁴ In view of this, we could well say that the positioning of this slow movement as the third, instead of the usual second position, is the first instance of a meaningful coincidence.

2.2. Atypical characteristics within the movement

Within the slow movement itself, the juxtaposition of the discordant musical characters of a homophonic part-song in singing style and a rhythmic march may initially perplex listeners. With its lyrical opening theme, this movement projects itself as a typical slow movement in a large-scale sonata form composition, until marked changes at the surface level begin to undercut the movement's lyric musical discourse: these include the dotted rhythms and the fragmented (rather than cohesive) melodic material introduced in bars 59-74, which prime the listener for the following *Animato* middle section at measure 75.

The B section itself is an interplay of incongruent topics. On one hand, it is a march topic: 1) strong metrical accents; dotted rhythms; 2) it might be conducted in duple, although it inevitably changes into triple; 3) tattoo figure of grace notes leading to the downbeats, imitating the rhythms of drums. Yet on the other hand, we have the cello

³ Smallman, *The Piano Quartet and Quintet: Style, Structure, and Scoring*, 88.

⁴ Smallman, *The Piano Quartet and Quintet...*, 88.

giving the downbeats, establishing a 3/4 meter – unusual for a march topic. But even more uncharacteristic is the *pianissimo* and *piano* dynamic levels for the topic; these dynamics imbue the B section with lightness and a scherzando quality.

Yet, these unusual topical juxtapositions do not appear in isolation within the Quartet as a whole, and that they accordingly do not seem to be capricious or coincidental. Instead, the alternation of *Andante* and *Animato* sections in this *Andante* movement finds its parallel in the previous scherzo-type second movement, in which the A section has the quality of a part-song character followed by a B section that is more dance-like.

All these features – ternary form and the scherzo traits of the march-like section – make it evident that the movement itself, in many important ways, is also a scherzo. This identity, however, is hidden until the incursion of the scherzo-like *Animato* march section. This adds a Murr-like joke, namely, that the A and B sections are ‘switched over’. In other words, the song-like opening section is a typical lyrical trio section of a scherzo movement, whereas the central section is the more conventional scherzo. This reversal causes the movement to resemble a trio-scherzo-trio ternary structure. Serving a dual function of both a slow movement and scherzo, the *Andante* incongruously juxtaposes sections that are indeed the products of a deliberate compositional procedure, specifically, Brahms’s selection of form. Refer to Table 2 below for an analysis of the ternary form of the third movement.

A section (mm. 1-74)

Measure no.	1-17	17-26	27-39	40-44	44-48	48-52	52-59	59-74
Tonal area	E _b	g: V – i	E _b	E _b : I – V	modulatory	f: i – V	modulatory	c: V
Thematic/ Structural area	A	Bridge 1	A		Bridge (alternation of theme A and first bridge material)			Bridge 2

B section (mm. 75-167)

Measure no.	75-100	101-07	107-18	119-33	133-44	144-51	152-62	163-67
Tonal area	C	A _b – C	C	C	c: V – vii ^o 7/V	c: vii ^o 7/V	C: V (major mode!)	(C: vii ^o 7/V) – (E _b : Ger ⁶⁺ – V)
Thematic/ Structural area	B	B	Bridge 3 ¹	B	Bridge 3 ²		Re-transition	

A section and Coda (mm. 168-235)

Measure no.	168-83	184-93	194-207	207-18	218-35
Tonal area	E \flat	g: V – i	E \flat	E \flat	E \flat (tonic pedal)
Thematic/ Structural area	A	Bridge 1	A	Bridge 1 + theme A, effecting a final PAC at m. 218	Coda

Table 2. Formal analysis of Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25, third movement.

2.3. Motivic links within the movement

Brahms's general approach to musical form, according to Carl Dahlhaus, is a discourse, in which motives emerge from prior motives.⁵ In his compositions, altering the surface elements while retaining the underlying motivic components is not an unfamiliar concept – in fact, his predilection for motivic connection is an intentional aspect of his creative technique, as analysis of his surviving sketches has often disclosed. Although the external characteristics of each part may seem dissimilar (especially comparing *Andante* and *Animato* sections), the underlying motivic content is consistently connected, as we will be exploring in the next paragraphs. The opening theme of the third movement plays a crucial role in influencing the organic unity of this piece, as the whole movement is held together by intrinsic thematic links that trace back to the beginning theme (Ex. 1a-1h):

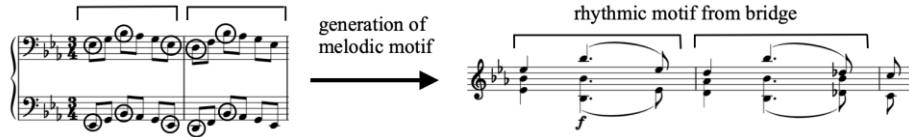
- **Ex. 1a (opening melody):** Notice how Brahms derives the next four measures of the phrase based on the half-steps and how he provides similar endings in both the first four measures and the next four measures.



Ex. 1a. Brahms, Piano Quartet op. 25/III, mm. 1-8 (Opening melody).

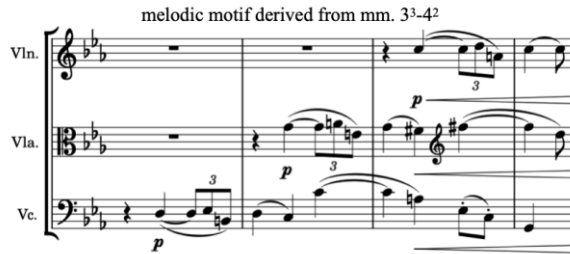
⁵ Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, 50.

follow a similar melodic contour that rises upwards from D to B \flat through an arpeggiation of the dominant harmony, followed by a descent. As we might observe, from the circled notes, the strings' countermelody is derived from the piano accompaniment.



Ex. 1e. Brahms, Piano Quartet op. 25/III, mm. 1-2 (Opening theme, Piano);
 and mm. 40-41 (Countermelody, Strings).

- **Ex. 1f:** Bridge 2 is in a quasi-fugato style, with use of material from mm. 3-4. The subject of Bridge 2 begins on a tone that moves up by one half-step and descends by fourth, followed by a melodic third ascent that resolves downwards.



Ex. 1f. Brahms, Piano Quartet op. 25/III, mm. 61-64 (Bridge 2, stretto, Strings).

- **Ex. 1g:** This B section is most extraordinary in that it preserves the A section's motivic ingredients, in spite of its completely different, march-like theme. The E \flat -D-E \flat in the opening melody is transformed into the C major mode E-D-E. Similarly, A \flat -G-F in m. 3 is altered to A-G-F.

Ex. 1g. Brahms, Piano Quartet op. 25/III, mm. 75-78 (Main theme of B section, Piano).

- **Ex. 1h:** The motive of the third bridge is based on the tritone interval. Upon closer examination, it is an inversion of the melodic motive in measure 33.

Ex. 1h. Brahms, Piano Quartet op. 25/III, mm. 107-109 (Bridge 3, Violin).

Considering the preceding discussion allows us to perceive the organic unity throughout the third movement, even if thematic connections are not always overt. Initially, the materials in Ex. 1 appear to show few obvious relations. Yet, upon closer scrutiny, we notice that the same motivic ingredients are preserved.

In a broader historical context, much of Brahms's music is firmly rooted in Classical conventions in terms of his use of forms, genres, and an intense combination of classical and romantic techniques. Yet it is remarkable how Brahms often distorts these eighteenth-century procedures, creating discontinuity between his broad observance of a conventional procedure and its application in a particular work or in a specific instance, in order to highlight key expressive moments.⁶ In the following examples, we shall see how Brahms manipulates historical styles, using baroque procedures within the romantic musical context to create discontinuities. The first example of discontinuity can be found in the transition between A and B sections (bars 59-74), in which the lyrical subject of the fugato passages is placed in a new context of a steady rhythmic character provided by the dotted rhythm accompaniment. Other examples are found in the two *fortissimo* bridges within the B section, the first one (bars 107-18) transitions back into a *fortissimo* march played by the strings and the second one (bars 133-43) moves into the re-transition area (bars 138-43). As in the previous case, the fugato subject in these two cases is pitted

⁶ Mahrt, "Brahms and Reminiscence: A Special Use of Classic Conventions", 75-76.

against the rhythmic triplets, this time creating a strong discontinuity with the prior sixteenth-note subdivision. In these cases, Brahms fashioned these passages as loose fugal expositions that quickly give way into homophony. These passages are examples of the ways in which Brahms marshals the learned style in service of articulating the structure – to achieve motivic and formal coherence of the movement.⁷

Another way in which Brahms distorts Classic conventions can be seen in his treatment of the recapitulation. In order to create a highly expressive moment, Brahms frequently conceals the start of the recapitulation by having the material return in an obscured manner, often producing the effect of delayed realization that the recapitulation has already occurred. In the third movement, for example, the return of the A section is masked – the melody is highly decorated with non-harmonic tones; the notes are tied over at the downbeat; the underlying accompaniment figurations are in triplets; the harmony is a dominant rather than the tonic. Only 4 measures later does it become clearer that the A section has returned, yet it is still slightly veiled due to the triplet pattern in the piano accompaniment. The return of the A section emerges only gradually, until, finally, all the elements of the A section are confirmed in measure 176, nine measures after the ‘veiled’ beginning of the reprise. William Mahrt, Associate Professor of Musicology at Stanford University, in his essay “Brahms and Reminiscence”, terms this procedure as a “reminiscence, whose quality is a savoring of the delayed realization of the significance of a past event.”⁸

2.4. Underlying connections with other movements of the Quartet

To show that the third movement is highly integrated within the work as a whole, despite its unusual topical and formal traits, I will now demonstrate the underlying connections of the *Andante* with other movements of the Quartet.

2.4.1. Connection with the first movement

Referring to Table 2, the first section of the large-scale ternary form consists of two small sections which are related to each other and connected by an eight-measures bridge. These eight measures (mm. 17-26) play a crucial role in this integrative process. This passage seems to be a transition because:

- 1) It is pregnant with chromaticism;
- 2) It is composed based on thematic fragmentation;

⁷ Other examples may be found in the following article. Smith, “Brahms and Subject/Answer Rhetoric”.

⁸ Mahrt, “Brahms and Reminiscence...”, 80.

3) Circle of fifth, with long pedal tones on D (dominant of G minor) and G.

Yet, of notable interest here is that the bridge produces no modulation; instead, it merely leads back into a repeat of the opening theme in the movement's tonic key, E \flat major. This poses an important question: Is there any point for Brahms to use a redundant bridge section that is set in a different tonal context of G minor, and one that has no bearing on the key area at all? Yes indeed. The most plausible explanation is that Brahms's primary goal in the first bridge is to subtly allude to G minor, the quartet's global tonic and the key of first movement, rather than to effect a modulation.

The connection with the opening movement is further confirmed by the tonal design seen in the recapitulation of the first movement, where the secondary theme is rested not in the tonic, as classical practice would dictate, but rather in the submediant, E \flat major, thus foreshadowing the key of the A section of the *Andante* movement. Tables 3a and 3b below show the way in which the secondary theme area of the first movement's recapitulation points to the tonal schemes of the *Andante* movement.

Measure no.	281-88	289-304
Tonal area	E \flat	E \flat – (g: V – I)
Thematic/Structural area	S ¹	S ²

Table 3a. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25/I, Recapitulatory Secondary-area

Measure no.	1-17	17-26	27-39	40-44	44-48	48-52	52-59	59-74
Tonal area	E \flat	g: V – I	E \flat	E \flat : I – V	modulatory	f: i – V	modulatory	c: V
Thematic/Structural area	A	Bridge 1	A	Bridge (alternation of theme A and first bridge material)			Bridge 2	

Table 3b. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25/III, A section

Having arrived at the tonic recapitulation, the harmonic movement into E \flat major (bVI) is an unexpected tonal gesture. Again, Brahms's unorthodox harmonic gesture proves to be entirely purposeful when viewed in terms of the connection with other movements. These manipulations of key centers within and among movements derive from the practices of Franz Schubert, whose music greatly influenced Brahms during his so-called 'first maturity,' when the Quartet in G minor was composed.

2.4.2. Connection with the second movement

Similarly, the key areas of the third movement's *Animato* B section, C – A_b – C, had been anticipated by the previous *Intermezzo* movement, which also goes from C minor to A_b major and back to C minor (compare Tables 4a and 4b). In addition, both inner movements share a similar third relationship in their overall ternary design: E_b – C – E_b (third movement) and c – A_b – c/C (second movement), where the middle sections of both movements are in the submediant major tonal area (compare Tables 4a and 4c).

Measure no.	1-116	117-192	193-308	309-321
Tonal area	c	A _b	c	C
Thematic/ Structural area	Intermezzo (Allegro, ma non troppo)	Trio (Animato)	Intermezzo (Allegro, ma non troppo)	Coda (Animato)

Table 4a. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25/II.

Measure no.	75-100	101-07	107-18	119-33	133-44	144-51	152-62	163-67
Tonal area	C	A _b – C	C	C	c: V – vii ^o 7/V	c: vii ^o 7/V	C: V (major mode!)	(C: vii ^o 7/V) – (E _b : Ger ⁶⁺ – V)
Thematic/ Structural area	B	B	Bridge 3 ¹	B	Bridge 3 ²		Re-transition	

Table 4b. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25/III, B section.

Measure no.	1-74	75-167	168-218	218-235
Tonal area	E _b	C	E _b	E _b
Thematic/ Structural area	A (Andante, con moto)	B (Animato)	A (*Andante, con moto)	Coda (Poco Animato)

Table 4c. Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25/III, entire movement.

Of course, third relationships are ubiquitous throughout nineteenth-century music and are especially pronounced in the music of Schubert, whose harmonic and sonata-form

practices greatly influenced Brahms. Yet, in view of the fact that Brahms was very much interested in creating connections among movements within the larger work, the similar tonal relationships between the inner movements of the quartet most likely suggest a meaningful coincidence, not just a capricious accident.

2.4.3. Connection with the fourth movement

Another familiar topic in Brahms's music, the Hungarian style, illustrates the same point. In discussions of the *style hongrois* in Brahms's music, the fourth movement of this Piano Quartet is often cited, since its Italian title *Rondo alla Zingarese*, is an explicit reference to its quintessential practitioners, Hungarian Roma or gypsies. Even so, it is important to recognize that Brahms, as a composer who was intrigued by the Hungarian style, probably applied the topic of *style hongrois* to some of his other music even though he did not specifically mention it in the title.

Concealed in the A section of the *Andante* movement of op. 25 are Hungarian gestures of the syncopated, weak-beat *alla zoppa* rhythm in the viola part in much of the A section. At first glance, this syncopated rhythm seems to be placed in the 'wrong context' of an *Andante* singing melody, even if Brahms had meant for this to be simply one of the motivic connections with the first movement. The syncopation is hardly recognizable without looking at the score, because it's not the first thing we would be drawn to as a listener. Yet, this *alla zoppa* rhythm is worth mentioning because this is not the first time Brahms uses this rhythm in an inner part of the Quartet in G minor; it has already occurred in the First movement. Through this capricious play of coincidence and by the concealed *alla zoppa* rhythm in the viola part, Brahms could be making a statement about the association with the Hungarian element, which will finally become the most pronounced in the finale movement.

The B section of the third movement, sharing similar characteristics with the opening of the second movement of Schubert's C major Symphony, closely resembles the "tight, giusto" type of the *verbunkos* that Csilla Pethő expounds in her article on the subject;⁹ Pethő mentions that this type "does not appear directly but sublimated."¹⁰ In a stylized manner, the *Animato* march section alludes to the Hungarian style with its dotted rhythms, resemblances of turn motifs and the stressed fourth step (mm. 76-77 and mm. 86-87). Brahms's indirect references to the Hungarian topic in this movement is perhaps not for exotic coloring, but to organically tie all the movements of the First Piano Quartet through a motivic process of unfolding of the topic of *style hongrois*, which eventually culminates in the fourth movement. The connection with the fourth movement can be further

⁹ Hungarian Influence in Schubert's literature is analyzed in depth in pp. 252-80 of the article. Pethő, "'Style Hongrois'. Hungarian Elements in the Works of Haydn, Beethoven, Weber and Schubert"

¹⁰ Pethő, "'Style Hongrois'...", 268.

established by the similar use of fugato passages in bars 311-319 and bars 330-351 of the fourth movement.

Conclusion

I began my article with a phrase from Hoffmann's novel – "The capricious play of coincidences". Anything but capricious, these intentional designs within Brahms's compositional procedures are manifested in the third movement through its unusual position within the quartet, the appearance of unorthodox musical gestures at specific places, the distortion of Classic conventions, the unusual tonal areas within diverse forms, and indirect references to the Hungarian style. Understanding Brahms's interplay of coincidences and intentions in this movement enables us to appreciate the motivic, harmonic, and topical connections in light of their placement throughout the entire First Piano Quartet.

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