

Romantic-era music linked to real-life romantic entanglement

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Credit: University of Kansas

There's a juicy psychological, even romantic, angle underlying his mathematical analysis of an important Johannes Brahms composition in the new book co-written and edited by Scott Murphy, University of Kansas professor of music theory.

Murphy's chapter in [Brahms and the Shaping of Time](#) (2018, University of Rochester Press) is titled "Durational Enharmonicism and the Opening of Brahms' 'Double Concerto.'" The book is part of the publisher's Eastman Studies in Music series, named for the New York university's renowned music school.

In addition to his editing tasks, Murphy contributed the book's introduction and one of its nine chapters.

In his chapter, Murphy analyzes the rhythmic patterns in Brahms' so-called "Double" Concerto in A Minor for Violin and Cello, op. 102, finding meaning in them that reflects the personal struggles of the composer, his friend Joseph Joachim and Joachim's estranged wife.

"Brahms had a friend, Joseph Joachim, who was one of the leading violinists of the 19th century and also something of a composer," Murphy said. "The two would trade compositions back and forth. They had a friendship for decades until they got into a domestic situation.

"Joachim's wife, Amalie, was filing for divorce, frustrated with the fact that her husband thought her to be unfaithful, whereas she claimed that she had not been. Joachim was prone to these flights of fancy, given even just a little bit of context, to think that, for example, 'Oh, this publisher is having an affair with my wife.' So in the divorce proceeding, Amalie turned to Brahms to support her, because Brahms had known Joachim for years and knew this side of Joachim. So Brahms wrote a letter to Amalie, supporting her side of things, stating his familiarity with Joachim's personality and his propensity for suspicion.

"This letter was intended to be private. However, it came out, not only in the court proceedings but also in public. When Joachim learned of this, he was enraged, and he and Brahms had a falling out."

Seven years later, in the latter stages of the so-called Romantic period, Murphy said, Brahms wrote the double concerto "as something of an olive branch that he extended to his friend."

Brahms wrote the work for Joachim and the cellist Robert Hausmann. And while Brahms himself played piano, Murphy said that in this analysis, the composer can be thought of as the cello part.

"It starts off with the orchestra," Murphy said, "and then the cello soloist comes in and plays particularly three notes very low in the range, and the relation between what the orchestra and the cello plays is quite interesting rhythmically.

"We have a situation where the cellist is coming in, and we can understand its varied durations in one of two different ways. And in the book chapter, I connect that then to the biographical idea behind the concerto, which is that we have this situation that can be understood in one of two very different ways. And so, depending on one's context, then one has a certain perception or understanding of a certain phenomenon.

"And I think it's quite fitting that the violinist is not privy to the notation. The violinist is still standing there, waiting to come in. It's the cellist that is given these notes. It is given the notational truth, as it were. However, the violinist doesn't have that information. And the violinist never plays these triplets anywhere in the concerto. It's only the cello part that has them.

"And so the cellist is given the notational truth, like Brahms is given the truth of the situation about his friend. Whereas Joachim, unfortunately, has less of a clear mind about this and is more easily swayed by certain changes in context."

Just as a single musical note can be understood as a D sharp or an E flat,

depending on its context, so, too, Murphy argues, can the duration of a note Brahms employs be understood in two different ways, depending on its context.

"So that's how I apply the idea of enharmonicism in pitch to the idea of enharmonicism with duration," he said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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