Discontinuity and Performance:  
The Allegro appassionato from Brahms’s Sonata Op. 120, No. 2

The article develops an interpretation of the second movement of Brahms’s Sonata Op. 120, No. 2 that responds to discontinuities presented early in the movement. The analysis relates these discontinuities to other events that challenge musical continuity but also to elements that forge thematic and tonal linkages. Conceptualizing this movement in terms of competing forces of continuity and discontinuity provides a framework to contextualize performance choices. The article demonstrates this framework’s potential to shed light on Brahms’s notated performance indications and to assist in developing a coherent performance approach.

Musicologists have only started to devote significant attention to performance traditions of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, unlike their considerable work on performance practices of prior periods. This expanded focus resulted not because all of the performance questions about earlier repertoires have been answered, but from a growing awareness that performance approaches have changed since the late-nineteenth century, despite continuous transmission of its repertoire. A superb recent collection of essays examines the performance of Brahms’s music, drawing on sources such as Brahms’s letters, score annotations made by those with direct contact with Brahms, treatises by performers associated with Brahms, recordings by performers from Brahms’s circle, and revisions Brahms made to performance indications in his scores.¹ Historical research, though, is not the only stimulus to rethinking performance approach; analysis also offers performance insights.

The performance information accessible through analysis differs in at least three ways from what obtained through historical inquiry. First, whereas historical sources give an idea of how performers executed a particular performance indication, analysis can suggest why the composer notated that performance indication in the first place. This level of understanding has a subtle but meaningful impact on performance. Second, analysis can reveal information implied, but not directly notated, in the score; in Brahms’s music, metric organization above the level of the bar, for example, is relevant but not directly recorded in the musical notation. Third, except for those instances where historical documentation on performance of a specific work survives, historical sources provide general performance approaches whereas analysis focuses on interpreting the individual work.

The analytic literature on Brahms’s music is large and continually growing, but few writers specifically address performance issues. When performance is mentioned, one of two perspectives tends to emerge. Wallace Berry’s comments on Brahms’s Capriccio Op. 76, No. 4 typify the first. Berry completes a detailed analysis and gives a series of recommendations to bring out – or not emphasize – various aspects of the music. Information flows from the analysis into a set of prescriptions for performance. The second perspective is apparent in Peter Smith’s study of metric displacement in Brahms’s horn and clarinet trios. Smith aptly writes:

‘Nuances of tone, dynamics, and phrasing can have a decisive impact on the projected accent pattern of a metrically ambiguous passage. At the same time, a performer’s reading of metric cues in the score has a seminal influence on the entire complex of physical activity that creates an expressive performance. The question of whether a performer should articulate the notated meter in the face of conflicting signals, or should allow the signs of displacement to dominate, remains open. The answer will depend on the particular metric context as well as on the performer’s own taste, style, and interpretation.’

Smith recognizes not only the problems inherent in directly correlating analytic observation with performance directive but also the reciprocal nature between analysis and performance. Although Smith admits that ‘the particular metric context’ is a factor in determining an appropriate performance choice, Smith’s practice in the remainder of his article is to present analytic observations without suggesting how musical context might render one performance choice more effective than another. His recognition of the central role of the performer leads him to avoid speculation on performance decisions altogether.

In the present article, I will develop an interpretive perspective on the second movement of Brahms’s Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 120, No. 2. Rather than prescribing a set of performance choices, my aim is to present an interpretive mode through which many seemingly unrelated performance aspects may be productively considered. Although there are many analytic avenues into a composition, an analysis that provides a global framework for local events and that shows relationships among disparate moments in a work is of particular value for performance. A thoroughly satisfying rendition of a work

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3 The prescriptive aspect of Berry’s approach has been noted in reviews by John Rink in Music Analysis 9 (1990) 3, pp. 319-39; Steve Larson and Cynthia Folio in Journal of Music Theory 35 (1991) 2, pp. 298-309; and Joel Lester in Music Theory Spectrum 14 (1992) 1, pp. 75-81.
by Brahms consists of more than a series of sensitively shaped phrases; the phrases cohere in a way that suggests an overall conception of the work.\(^6\)

What is the nature of this global analytic framework? Study of tonal structure – especially from a Schenkerian perspective – provides a valuable synoptic view of a work, and many writers have convincingly related Schenkerian analysis to performance.\(^7\) The individualities of a piece, however, may suggest additional frameworks. Elsewhere, I have traced a metric narrative in Brahms’s Capriccio Op. 76, No. 8 and given some indication of how that narrative can contextualize performance choices throughout the piece.\(^8\) Although that analysis also engages tonal and motivic structures, it reads Brahms’s handling of meter in Op. 76, No. 8 as especially distinctive and thus as an effective basis for interpreting the work. In my discussion of the Allegro appassionato from Op. 120, No. 2, I will draw on Schenkerian tonal and metric methodologies, but in the service of a broader basis for analysis: musical discontinuity and its ramifications.

Brahms’s music is exceedingly continuous, a characteristic encapsulated in Schoenberg’s famous designation ‘musical prose’.\(^9\) In the middle movement of Op. 120, No. 2, however, continuity is called into question at several key moments. These discontinuities emerge within phrases, between phrases, and at the largest dimensions of form. My analysis will expose these marked moments, speculate on Brahms’s understanding of these discontinuities as suggested by his performance indications, and consider how awareness of an ongoing tension between continuity and discontinuity can contextualize local performance choices.

The Allegro appassionato movement functions as a scherzo, and it has the conventional ABA form with both A and B sections in rounded binary design. Closer inspection reveals a unique realization of the rounded binary design in the A section (bars 1-80). The music solidly returns to a tonic chord in the key of Eb minor at bar 27, but the thematic reprise does not take place until bar 37. Brahms’s music not infrequently separates the moments of tonal and thematic return, but it nearly always does so by deferring the tonal return until after the thematic return has begun.\(^10\) In this

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\(^10\) For detailed discussion of this see Peter Smith, ‘Brahms and Schenker: A Mutual Response to Sonata Form’, Music Theory Spectrum 16 (1994) 1, pp. 77-103. One common strategy is to prolong dominant harmony throughout the first bars of the thematic return; another is to provide a return of the tonic bass note but to place a sonority other than a root-position triad above it.
movement, the reverse occurs, and the bars between the tonal return and the thematic reprise are a critical passage for analyst and performers.\textsuperscript{11}

There are several alternative conceptualizations of the tonal function of the bars between the tonal return and the thematic reprise. One possibility is a prolongational relationship between the $E_b$-minor chords in bars 27 and 37. As shown by the graph at (a) in Example 1, bars 27 through 36 present a motion from I down to V via an expansion of the submediant.\textsuperscript{12} The $E_b$-minor chord at the thematic reprise continues the prolongational span initiated at bar 27. This interpretation can be rationalized as a conflict between tonal structure and thematic design (between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ forms), but hearing the arrival on $E_b$-minor at bar 37 as a resumption of a middleground prolongation rather than the inception of a new one is not aurally convincing. A second possibility is to understand the $E_b$-minor arrival at bar 27 as closing the span of tonic harmony from the beginning of the movement (see graph (b) in Example 1).

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{c}
\textbf{Example 1}  \\
\textbf{Tonal interpretations of $E_b$ minor at bar 27.}
\end{tabular}
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This reading permits the $E_b$-minor chord that coincides with the thematic reprise to begin a middleground prolongational span, but it is no more satisfactory than the first interpretation due to the closural function ascribed to bar 27. At bar 27, the listener is prepared for the thematic reprise; the clarinet could have joined in the $B_b$ to $G_b$ motion and recalled the opening melody. I propose a third reading for this passage, a reading that is both more radical and, for this analyst, more satisfactory: viewing bars 27-36 as a structural parenthesis.

Interpreting these bars as in some way parenthetical to the movement’s tonal structure resolves the contradictions in the other models of tonal structure. If these bars

\textsuperscript{11} It is not uncommon for there to be a weakly emphasized return to tonic harmony before a thematic reprise. In those cases, however, the tonal function of the tonic is subsidiary to some other prolongational span (i.e. dominant harmony); as will become clear below, such an interpretation is not possible in the present movement. For an example of an apparent tonal return that ultimately functions within a dominant span, see bars 112-14 of the first movement of Brahms’s Cello Sonata in F major, Op. 99, and the discussion in Peter Smith, ‘Liquidation, Augmentation, and Brahms’s Recapitulatory Overlaps’, \textit{19th-Century Music} 17 (1994) 3, pp. 247-53.

\textsuperscript{12} The graph spells notes according to their tonal function (submediant) rather than in the enharmonic spellings that Brahms uses in the piano part in bars 30-34. Brahms’s enharmonics are purely for ease of reading the score; there is no enharmonic reinterpretation in this passage.
are understood as a structural parenthesis, then the E♭-minor arrivals at bars 27 and 37 are the same tonal event. They do not enter into a prolongational relationship with one another because they represent the same moment in musical time. In terms of listening experience, the type of musical motion that has been ongoing since the start of the movement is suspended in bar 27 and resumes only after E♭-minor harmony is reattained in bar 37.

Elements of harmony, thematic design, and hypermeter support a parenthetical role for bars 27-36. Harmonically, these bars include a digressive foray into the submediant. Except for its first and last bars, the passage is entirely connected with submediant harmony, first minor in quality and only in the normative major quality at bar 35. In addition to the modal mixture, Brahms does not introduce the submediant harmony through typical passing bass motion (the descending tetrachord $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}$-$\hat{8}$). The passing scale degree $\hat{7}$ is usually the bass note for an inverted dominant (V$\frac{7}{4}$) of the submediant. In this passage, Brahms introduces the dominant of the submediant by forcing the bass up a semitone to $B$ rather than going down to $D$. In fact, throughout the entire passage Brahms avoids placing $D$ in the bass, but uses each of the other notes in the $G^7$-harmony as a bass note. Thematically, the clarinet twice attempts to begin the opening melody, but is unable to continue. Each time the $G$ is elongated by a bar and is subjected to a sudden drop in dynamics (forte-piano indication). Thematic foreshadowing often precedes a thematic reprise, but the peregrination of the clarinet in these bars is not at all analogous to the repetition of a motivic component of an opening theme or the fragmentation of a theme into progressively shorter units that one finds in the goal-directed approach to a thematic reprise in Haydn or Beethoven. Hypermetric organization also contributes to a parenthetical understanding of this passage. At the beginning of the movement, four-bar hypermeter is established through harmonic rhythm and melodic design. The first eight bars, which are repeated, have a $2 + 2 + 4$ melodic design. Bars 17-20 present another four-bar unit, but this hypermeter breaks down in the approach to the E♭-minor triad of bar 27. I will return to the hypermetric organization of this passage in greater detail below. Acting alone, the tonal digressiveness, the thematic transformation, or the hypermetric dissolution would not create the effect of parenthesis; in combination, however, they induce a seam in the musical fabric.

How might a parenthetical understanding of bars 27-36 relate to performance? Parenthesis emphasizes elements of contrast. Of foremost significance is Brahms’s forte-piano indication at the clarinet’s entrances. An immediate drop in dynamics after the initial attack communicates that the note will not spawn a complete restatement of the melody. This dynamic marking goes against a performer’s habit to change volume gradually during a sustained note in order to keep the music flowing. Brahms’s marking indicates a special effect – a suspenseful waiting; after the rising sixth from $B$ to $G$ the listener expects continuation. In the piano part, it is more difficult to execute the forte-piano indication due to the greater resonance of the piano’s bass register. The bass $F$, though, is crucial in immediately undermining the melody’s $G$, and the passage deserves considerable experimentation with balance and pedaling.

Brahms’s other performance indications in these bars also suggest an interpretation that highlights contrast. At the start of the movement, the quarter-note anacrusis is connected smoothly to the following downbeat. In the parenthetical passage, anacrases in the piano part receive staccato marks and are also marked fortissimo. The upbeat to the E♭-minor chord of bar 27 is superficially puzzling: it is marked fortissimo, but it does not have a staccato mark. Playing this upbeat separately from the ensuing E♭-minor chord eliminates a seeming anomaly in Brahms’s score by making the performance gestures
in bars 26-27, 30-31, and 34-35 the same. Such conformity bears on the parenthetical interpretation I have advanced for this passage. The parenthesis does not begin until after the arrival on the B♭-minor harmony of bar 27. When the anacrusis to bar 27 sounds, one still anticipates a reprise of the opening melody. Keeping the articulation of that anacrusis the same as at the beginning of the movement maintains this expectation until it is shattered by the forte-piano indication and the jarring B♭ bass note of the following bar; playing that anacrusis separately gives advance notice of the coming digression.

Before considering the relevance of this parenthetical passage for the rest of the movement, I return to the hypermetric context of the parenthesis. As mentioned previously, four-bar hypermeter is securely projected throughout the first phrases of the movement. In bars 21-24, the hypermeter breaks down when a sequential repetition of the material from bars 17-20 is not realized. Example 2 is a recomposition of bars 17-27 that suggests a prototype for these bars.

![Example 2](image)

At the downbeat of the eighth bar, one expects a return to B♭ in the melody. In Brahms's version, that B♭ is denied by D♭. On the following beat of bar 24, Brahms provides E♭, but only as part of a stepwise ascent to the <F, Ab, G♭> (bar 25) transposition of the ‘up a third, down a second’ motive that has pervaded the previous bars. Brahms's performance indications make clear the changed structural role of E♭ in bar 24; it comes after a diminuendo and before a crescendo that is much longer than any of the crescendos in the previous bars. This long crescendo directs the music to the downbeat of bar 27, the moment when thematic reprise is expected. In Brahms's version, these features conspire to expand the four-bar hypermeter, delaying a strong hypermetric arrival until bar 27. This expansion helps to signal the structural importance of the E♭-minor arrival at bar 27; this arrival cannot be understood as a mere foreshadowing of E♭ minor that is tonally
subsidiary to an adjacent harmony (i.e., the dominant harmony of bar 26 could never enter into a prolongational relationship with the dominant harmony in bar 36). These elements suggest a performance that highlights the mobility of bar 24 by ensuring that there is no accentuation of the chord that harmonizes the $\text{Eb}$ on the second beat. Given the relationship of decrescendo markings and slurred groups in the previous bars, one could easily fall into the habit of accenting the second beat of bar 24, but that accent would needlessly disrupt the momentum towards bar 27.

The prominent role of discontinuity in bars 27-36 motivates an interpretive perspective on the rest of the movement. The thematic reprise spans over fifty bars, a length much greater than the repeated eight-bar phrase that constituted the first half of the Allegro appassionato's binary form. Whereas bars 1-8 consisted of a single phrase in a $2 + 2 + 4$ design, the thematic reprise does not reattain that symmetry. Instead, after the powerful discontinuities that preceded it, the reprise struggles to maintain musical continuity within its phrases. My interpretation will propose that the apparent discontinuities within the thematic reprise are different from those of bars 27-36, and it will consider how these distinctions relate to performance. The thematic reprise proceeds in two parts: bars 37-48 and 49-80; I will consider each in turn.

The thematic reprise follows the course of the opening for several bars; only in the sixth bar of the reprise (bar 42) do changes occur to avoid modulation away from $\text{Eb}$ minor. The new material not only changes the phrase’s tonal goal but also eschews the metric regularity of the start of the movement. It is possible to understand the hypermetric structure of bars 37-48 as three four-bar hypermeasures. Bar 45, which corresponds to the start of the third hypermeasure in this interpretation, offers some support since the clarinet drops out, leaving the piano’s high $\text{Gb}$ as a convincing hyperdownbeat. Yet, aspects of bars 41-48 challenge this hypermeter. Two-beat motives pass between clarinet and piano in bars 43-44; bars 41-48 present eight bars of music despite their analogous function to bars 5-8. Example 3 demonstrates hearings of bars 41-48 other than as a continuation of the piece’s normative triple meter and four-bar hypermeter. Responding to the sense that bars 41-48 expand a single four-bar hypermeasure leads to the interpretations shown at Example 3a. In hypermeter 1, the second hyperbeat is expanded and the third and fourth hyperbeats fall on the chords at the end of the phrase, which are notated as downbeats. In hypermeter 2, the second hyperbeat is similarly expanded, but the rapid imitation of two-beat motives weakens the metric frame sufficiently to allow the harmonic changes at the end of the phrase to sound metrically strong. The last two hyperbeats thus align with the low bass notes that precede the chords at the end of the phrase. The rebarrrings at Example 3b and 3c probe the mechanism that might allow these low bass notes to assume downbeat function; the rebarrrings suggest that a displaced triple or duple surface meter might emerge during the expanded second hyperbeat. The dotted barline in these rebarrrings is meant to express the weakening of the meter before the displaced meter emerges; although the representation shows the displaced meter beginning precisely with the clarinet’s high $\text{Bb}$, one should imagine these examples with the strength of the displaced meter gradually increasing throughout each example.

Reflection on elements of continuity and discontinuity in this passage can inform the web of metric possibilities outlined in Example 3. Compared to bars 27-36, there is little discontinuity in the present passage. The expansion of the phrase results from a continuous process of motivic development. The segment from the third beat of bar 42 to the second beat of bar 43 ($\text{A}b\text{ }- \text{F}\text{-Bb} - \text{A}b\text{-Bb}$) is an approximate transposition of the previous three beats ($\text{F}\text{-Eb}\text{-Gb} - \text{Bb}\text{-Gb}$). With the pickup to bar 44, the motivic units reduce from three beats to two beats by removing the terminal auxiliary-note figure (e.g. $\text{Bb}\text{-Gb}\text{-Eb}$) rather than
B♭-G♭-Eb-D♭-Eb). The harmonic context for this motivic development is the descending circle-of-fifths, the underpinning of common-practice harmony. Thus, although the phrase ends on the dominant rather than achieving tonal closure, there is no moment of disjuncture anywhere within bars 41-48. When the next phrase begins at the end of bar 48, it gives the impression of returning to essentially the same musical space as the previous bars; it is simply charged with completing the tonal motion that the previous phrase left open. The predominance of continuity over discontinuity in the internal construction of this phrase may suggest a similarly continuous metric structure. In other words, perhaps the two-beat motivic units are purely rhythmic (grouping) dissonances that strain against the notated triple meter but do not cause it to break down.

That Brahms maintained 3/4 as the notated meter throughout bars 44-48 is not conclusive evidence of the metric state of this passage. Frequently, true shifts in perceived downbeats (as opposed to rhythmic groups that are not aligned with the meter) take place without any change in metric notation. Two of Brahms’s performance indications, however, may lend support to the notated meter. The forte indication in bar 45 makes clear that the bar should begin strongly and its placement – only one bar after the last
forte indication – suggests that Brahms imagined this bar as in some way a beginning. This beginning function could be a metric one, as the inception of a new four-bar hypermeasure. The second performance indication is the staccato articulation given to the low bass notes at the ends of bars 45 and 46. This notation – even if one were to sustain these low bass notes in the pedal for harmonic reasons – suggests that these quarter notes should recall the effect of the piano’s interjections in bars 30-31 and 34-35 and be projected as anacrases. Performance choices that entirely efface the notated meter not only lend this passage an element of discontinuity that seems out of keeping with its other musical attributes, but they also obscure this significant motivic connection.

The second part of the thematic reprise includes a truly exceptional moment at bar 65 when a complete bar of silence follows an arrival on a diminished-seventh chord. The relationship of this silence to the movement’s engagement with discontinuity emerges through consideration of tonal and rhythmic-metric contexts. The second part of the thematic reprise is a parallel period whose consequent phrase is greatly expanded; Example 4 provides an eight-bar prototype for bars 49-80. It is in the third bar of the consequent phrase – precisely when Brahms indicates *piu dolce* – where phrase expansion first occurs. The colorful harmony in that third bar is expanded across bars 55-58; the musical content of a single bar is stretched out over a four-bar unit. In addition to the model of bar 51 in the antecedent phrase, the melodic repetition within bars 55-58 clarifies the presence of phrase expansion. When the mechanism of the expansion is this evident, it is easy to distinguish between surface hypermeter and underlying hypermeter. In the underlying hypermeter, the fourth hyperbeat is reached only with the arrival of dominant harmony at bar 59. This fourth hyperbeat is itself subject to expansion; its expansion goes to bar 76, as demonstrated in Example 5.

![Example 5](image)

*Example 5*  
*Surface hypermeter in bars 59-77.*

The expansion of the fourth hyperbeat begins with a sequence constructed in two-bar units, and this creates an expectation that the expansion will have a periodic surface hypermeter. The surface hypermeter is interrupted by the stasis on the diminished-seventh chord; although one can readily hold onto the notated meter throughout this stasis, one cannot

Example 4

Eight-bar prototype for bars 49–80.
differentiate consecutive downbeats except by rigidly focusing on surface hypermeter at the neglect of every other aspect of the music. Even the surface hypermeter I have shown in Example 5 is perhaps not as prominent as my representation suggests. The resurgence of four-bar surface hypermeter is only confirmed through the melodic repetition in the clarinet melody in bars 73-77 (shown by the solid brackets in Example 5). The interval of the rising sixth between bars 66-67 and Brahms’s placement of the peak of a crescendo-diminuendo at bar 67 suggest that bar 67 has hypermetric priority over bar 66 (and 68), but this only provides orientation at the two-bar and not at the four-bar level. True, there is at last a change of harmony at bar 69, which would indicate that bar 69 – not bar 67 – is a hyperdownbeat at the four-bar level, but the sonority in bar 69 is a $\frac{5}{4}$ chord and second-inversion triads (except at cadences) are often metrically weak. In the wake of the stasis on the diminished seventh chord, there is a flattening of the metric hierarchy; the orientating influence of surface hypermeter temporarily recedes and is only resuscitated when the clarinet resumes its quarter-note motion and the harmony changes.

In performance, players can keep the musical continuity through the bar of silence by fading smoothly into the silence, not lengthening the bar of silence, having a soft reentry by the clarinetist after the silence, and making the reentry of the piano’s diminished seventh chord in bar 68 project as metrically weak. The shaping of the clarinet melody once quarter-note motion resumes suggests several possibilities. As indicated in Example 5, when the clarinet repeats its four-bar quarter-note melody the piano part introduces a rhythmic grouping dissonance; its bass notes come every two beats. The repetition of the clarinet’s melody may be shaped differently to reflect the duple elements in the piano part, or the clarinetist may proceed without relation to the duple groups in the accompaniment and thereby present both the triple meter and the four-bar hypermeter more securely before the tonal closure of bar 77. In either case, bars 77-80 provide a consonant four-bar unit that resolves duple aspects of bars 73-75 and brings the thematic reprise, at last, to a conclusion.

The phrases in the thematic reprise are repeatedly expanded and attenuate, but never suspend, musical continuity. There is one passage later in the movement, however, that draws directly on the material of the parenthesis. That passage occurs after the end of the Sostenuto middle section and before the return of the Allegro appassionato.

The music between the end of the Sostenuto (bar 135) and the return of the Allegro appassionato (bar 141) plays on the enharmonic relationship between B major (the key of the Sostenuto section) and C# major. There is a prolongational quandary not unlike the one between the Eb-minor triads of bars 27 and 37. Example 6 demonstrates two alternatives: a move to the dominant of Eb minor at bar 136 in reading (a), or a motion to the home dominant only at bar 140 in reading (b).

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Example 6} & \\
\text{Tonal interpretations of bars 135-141.}
\end{align*}\]
Yet, even this tonal ambiguity does not tell the full story. In either tonal interpretation, bars 139-140 – the recall of the material from the end of the parenthetical passage – is too facilely integrated. If one takes bar 136 as the return of the home dominant, then one expects the next tonal event to be the return to the movement’s opening. Making a prolongational connection between the $Bb$ of bar 136 and that of bar 140 neglects the schism induced by the return of the wrong material. The $C_7$ of bar 139 is more than an upper auxiliary within a dominant prolongation. On the other hand, reading (b) vastly downplays a listener’s knowledge of the impending return to $E_b$ minor and the exceedingly long length of the sustained $A^#$/Bb in bars 136-137 – a length more characteristic of a dominant scale degree than a leading note (and a moment that invokes the memory of the end of the slow movement of Beethoven’s *Emperor Concerto*!). As with the $E_b$-minor triads in bars 27 and 37, these structural ambiguities result from an excess of tonal content. The tonal structure of the passage would, of course, be without ambiguity if bars 139-140 were omitted; this would also be the case if the B-major chord of bar 135 proceeded directly to the $C_7$-major chord three bars later.

The intricacies of the music between the Sostenuto and the return of the Allegro appassionato suggest two basic interpretive stances. A performance might clarify the tonal function of the long $A^#$/Bb, or it might aim to leave the role of that pitch unclear. Taking extra time on the B-major chord in bar 135 somewhat increases the sense that the unharmonized pitch in the following bar functions principally as $Bb$ rather than $A^#$, unless that extra time is smoothly integrated into the ritardando Brahms notates at bar 133. Inserting a silence after the B-major chord would even more strongly articulate the $Bb$ (not $A^#$) as a new beginning.

My comments thus far have focused on four locations and suggested that these passages can be related to one another based on their deployment of forces that undermine musical continuity. In the final part of this study, I will demonstrate a broader engagement of continuity and discontinuity in this piece by examining Brahms’s binding together of adjacent formal units through motivic repetition, a process termed *Knüpftechnik* (linkage technique) in Schenkerian theory. Although linkage technique is common in Brahms’s music, its juxtaposition with discontinuous elements renders it especially significant. Awareness of both the forces of discontinuity and the instances of linkage technique provides an interpretive stance that truly encompasses the entire movement.

The most prominent instance of linkage technique occurs at the end of the first half of the binary form in the Allegro appassionato.

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**Example 7**

Linkage technique in bars 14-20.

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As shown in Example 7, the top line of the piano part in bars 15-16 (which is, of course, a repetition of the clarinet material from bars 7-8) becomes the basis for the clarinet melody at the start of the next phrase. This motivic repetition not only bridges this key structural point in binary form but it also sets in motion the process of motivic development that culminates with the previously described hypermetric expansion at bar 24. Brahms writes out the return of the Allegro appassionato, but includes only two alterations. One of these changes introduces another motivic repetition at a formal boundary. Brahms refashions the clarinet part at the seventh and eighth bars of the return to connect the two statements of the opening eight-bar phrase (see Example 8). The last five notes of the clarinet’s phrase are played a third lower than they were on the first hearing, and then the last three of these are shifted up a step to accompany the start of the piano’s melodic restatement (shown by the brackets above Example 8).

Example 8
Linkage technique in bars 147-150.

Thus, during the repeat of the Allegro appassionato, a form of linkage technique operates not only after the second statement of the melody but also between the statements. In addition to providing a beautiful connection between phrases, the new material smooths over the unusual tonal motion at this juncture. The first half of the binary form modulates to the key of the subtonic (Db major), which is an unusual tonal goal even in nineteenth-century adaptations of binary form. The occurrences of linkage cited in this paragraph emerge readily in performance.

There are connections operative between the Allegro appassionato and Sostenuto materials other than the choice of the submedian key for the Sostenuto and the interplay of G and B in the bars before the return of the Allegro appassionato. The connections between these expressively contrasting materials are tonal ones. The first bar of the Sostenuto functions as a dominant harmony in B major, but this function becomes clear retrospectively. On the downbeat, only F# (bass) and D# (upper part) sound; these pitches, enharmonically, suggest an Eb-minor chord in first inversion – in other words, a continuation of the tonal sphere of the Allegro appassionato. Brahms heightens this tonal association by making the tonal goal of the first part of the Sostenuto the mediant of B major, which is D# minor (= Eb minor). Root-position D#-minor harmony is reached by bar 91 and the ensuing four bars oscillate between tonic and dominant harmonies searching for melodic descent to D#. Resolution to root-position D#-minor harmony with D# in the melody is expected at the start of bar 95, but instead the clarinet enters and a restatement of the first half of the Sostenuto takes place. This fusion of cadential arrival on D# minor with restatement of the Sostenuto’s first bar makes explicit the ambiguity inherent in that first bar.

This subtle ambiguity has a complex relationship to performance. At the start of the Sostenuto, Brahms indicates a forte dynamic (tempered by ma dolce e ben cantando). This dynamic coupled with the complete change in texture do little to suggest any connection to the Eb minor at the end of the Allegro appassionato. A significant detail, though, is
the decrescendo that accompanies the F♯-G♯-A♯ quarter-note octaves in the left-hand of the piano part. A couple of perspectives between the decrescendo and the tonal content of this bar seem meaningful. One might imagine a gradual shift in function from a D♯ first-inversion harmony to an F♯ root-position harmony as the decrescendo proceeds. An alternative conceptualization might be that the decrescendo questions whether this chord that sounds like V13 of B major will actually be followed by a B-major harmony. In either case, the decrescendo indication invites a conception of this bar as not fully stable. This bar gently rubs against the chorale texture and rich register of the piano’s melody. The active qualities in this bar are more evident in the repeat since literal overlap is involved; at the repeat (bar 95), one could even adopt a polyphonic way of thinking about tonal functions. The D♯ in the right-hand of the piano part could be closural (i.e. scale degree 1 of D♯ minor) while the D♯ in the clarinet part could from its inception be construed as part of an extended dominant of B major. Crucial is the sense of overlap and reinterpretation in this bar, an effect that is denied if any separation is made before the restatement begins.

When this phrase returns in the second half of the Sostenuto’s rounded binary form, its tonal duality is further heightened. Two bars before the reprise, the music reaches a perfect authentic cadence in C♯ major (bar 119). This C♯-major harmony functions as V/V in B major, as depicted in graph (a) in Example 9. The fifth motion in the bass from C♯ down to F♯ is filled in by passing notes, as is the stepwise motion between C♯ and D♯ in the upper line; graph (b) incorporates these passing motions. The analysis in graph (c) shows the apparent harmonic change created by the confluence of passing notes. The foreground harmony in the bar before the reprise is a dominant seventh of D♯ minor, intensifying the D♯-minor aspect of the first bar of the reprise.15

Example 9
Tonal duality at thematic reprise in Sostenuto section (bars 119-122).

Brahms notates decrescendos for each pair of bass notes in the descent from C♯ to F♯. These decrescendos relate these melodic gestures with similar ones earlier in the Sostenuto, but they also draw attention to the foreground change of harmony; without any noted performance indications, a pianist would likely make a continuous crescendo (or possibly a continuous decrescendo) from the arrival on the C♯-major harmony until the onset

15 A motion from C♯ major to D♯ minor is enharmonically the same as the motion from D♯ major to E♯ minor traversed in bars 8-9 of the Allegro appassionato. The incorporation of the passing note between C♯ and D♯ in the approach to the reprise of the Sostenuto is rather similar to the new clarinet figure introduced in the ninth bar of the return of the Allegro appassionato (see the D♯-D♯-E♯ motion in Example 8).
of the reprise. The sense of division engendered by the separate dynamic shadings is enhanced by the rhythm of the bass line; the most typical rhythmic setting for the bass passing notes would have been half note-quarter note in each bar, rather than the reverse. Placing the longer note on the weaker beat of the bar intentionally halts the musical flow. Recognizing these details of dynamics and rhythm, along with the tonal ambiguity that they support, promotes a performance that gives the bar before the reprise significance and depth. There is much more for the pianist to contemplate in the Sostenuto than creating a full, singing, _ma dolce_ tone.

This study has considered discontinuities and continuities in the second movement of Brahms’s Sonata Op. 120, No. 2. I have suggested ways that this perspective might shape some aspects of performance, but I have certainly not exhausted the realm of performance possibilities; even performers who share similar analytic understandings of a work can create very different, but effective, performances. Nor have I pursued every element that embodies the tension between forces of continuity and discontinuity evident in this movement. The many ways that Brahms achieves and undermines musical continuity reveal a complex approach to temporality that is too often overshadowed in analyses that focus only on unifying elements. Incorporating such intricacy into a relatively short, ternary-form movement indicates not only that these movements deserve the detailed study routinely accorded sonata-form (and to some extent rondo) movements but also that they have a greater expressive role in multi-movement cycles than is generally recognized by analysts, and perhaps by performers as well.

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16 One of the most significant changes between the clarinet and viola versions of this sonata occurs in these bars; the clarinet is silent in bars 119-120 while the viola doubles the piano’s top line. The violist is thus able to make a continuous crescendo throughout these two bars and impact the tonal duality of the first bar of the reprise.

17 A further connection between the Sostenuto and the preceding Allegro appassionato can also be drawn. The E♭-minor harmony at the end of the Allegro appassionato (bars 77-80) has a plagal embellishment in bar 78 (an auxiliary 6/4 chord). Post-cadential expansion is a frequent use of the subdominant, but it is marked here since it is the first occurrence of a subdominant triad in this movement (in the key of E♭ minor or any of the keys tonicized in the Allegro appassionato). In the Sostenuto, the first harmony after the key of B major emerges is the subdominant triad of bar 83. In contrast to the Allegro appassionato, the subdominant triad frequently occurs in the Sostenuto section (bars 83, 87, 89 in D♭ minor, etc.). Like the duality of the D♭ and F♯ in the first bar of the Sostenuto, the plagal sonorities in the Sostenuto’s first phrase sensitively provide some continuity with the end of the previous section.

18 The interested reader might ponder, for example, the role of the descending bass tetrachord E♭-D♭-C♭-B♭ in this movement. A denial of this tetrachord was mentioned in relation to the F♯ in bar 28, but one might also consider the G♭ of bar 4 as denying the implication of the bass descent in bars 1-3. The only clear statement of the bass tetrachord occurs in the second part of the reprise (bars 49-52 and expanded across bars 53-59).