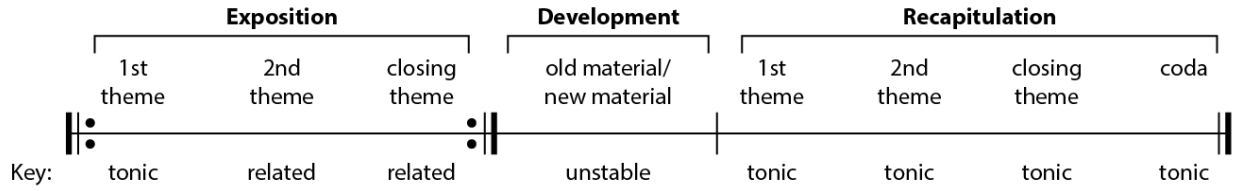
Recurrence and Expectation in the First Movement of Brahms's Third Symphony

According to formal abstractions describing sonata form since Haydn, the exposition and recapitulation present the listener with several repetitions of similar material, nearly identical in fact, outside of a transposition of the second theme group into the tonic key upon its final statement (see Example 1):



Example 1: An abstraction of sonata form showing repetition of musical material.

Leonard Meyer addresses the phenomenological experience of listening to repeated material in *Emotion and Meaning in Music*:

> The fact that as we listen to music we are constantly revising our opinions of what has happened in the past in the light of present events is important because it means that we are continually altering our expectations. It means, furthermore, that repetition, though it may exist physically, never exists psychologically. Thus, though it may seem a truism, it is of some moment to recognize that the repetition, say, of the exposition section of a sonata-form movement or that of the first-theme group in the recapitulation has quite a different meaning from that communicated by the original statement. (Meyer: 49)

Meyer argues that the psychological experience of hearing repeated material generates certain expectations. Those expectations can result in two types of tension for the listener: tension created by large-scale expectations about if or when a sound term will recur after its departure, and tension created by small-scale deviations from a directly reiterated sound term (Meyer: 152). In this paper, I explore the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony with not only an eye for repetition, but also an ear for the tension between sonata form expectations and the reality of the

piece. I suggest that Brahms both frustrates and fulfills expectations in the exposition and recapitulation by reversing the harmonic processes between one and the other.

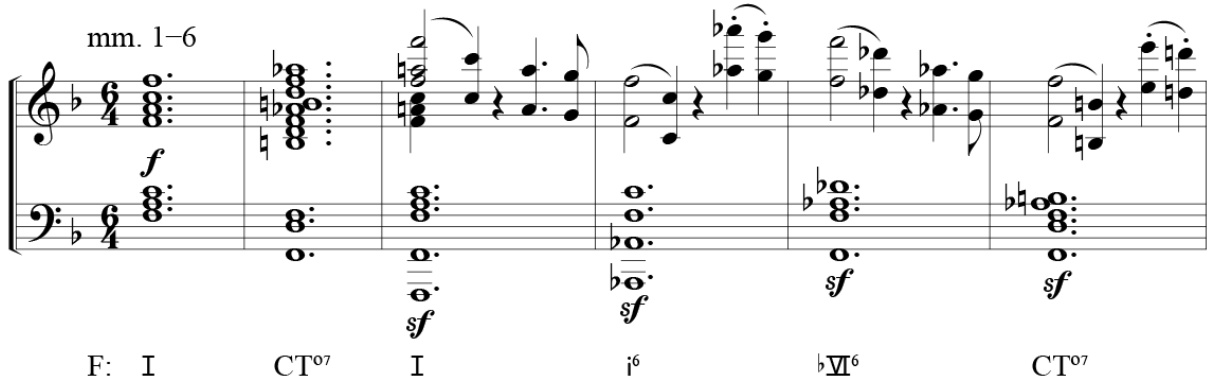
Before looking closely at either the exposition or recapitulation, it is important to establish the fact that the concept of a form is something that is constantly in flux and open to revision. The sonata form abstraction in Example 1 represents an average model based on a large body of musical evidence. The model is general in nature and should not be considered an ideal representation to which composers strove. In fact, as I will argue in this paper, a composer challenges, revises, and affirms elements of this abstract model with every piece composed. The composer relies not so much on abstract models as on internal coherences developed in the specific details of the given piece. Meyer discusses this fluidity of form when he says:

> The concept of a form involves abstraction and generalization. Our feeling of what a sonata form is…[derives] from our experience of a host of works in such forms….Once a work is recognized as being a type for which an abstract, normative class concept has been evolved, then that 'ideal type' becomes the basis for expectations…Such ideal types are not, however, fixed and rigid….Our class concept of a form is constantly being modified by new experiences of that form….It is partly this continual modification of formal conceptions which enables us to rehear a work many times. For as the norm with which we compare the particular has changed since a previous hearing, the expectations which are entertained on the basis of the norm will also have changed, and the new hearing will involve new perceptions and new meanings. (Meyer: 57-58)

Despite the fact that formal schemes are under constant scrutiny and revision, it is important to realize that a listener brings formal preconceptions to every listening experience. Thus, an audience member experiencing the first movement of a 19th century symphony is inclined to expect sonata form. Their real time hearing of the piece either confirms or challenges their normative sonata form preconception on a moment by moment basis. The second theme group, for instance, modulates to the dominant in the exposition and therefore affirms the theoretical model; or, the first theme group reappears in the wrong key after the development section and

therefore casts doubt on the model. In both of those hypothetical examples, the relationship between key center and thematic material is crucial in establishing listener expectations. In order to examine expectations in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony, we must now examine the particular rather than the general.

As any survey of musicological texts on the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony will attest, the opening measures have an incredible significance for the unfolding of the work. Example 2 shows a reduction of mm. 1–6:

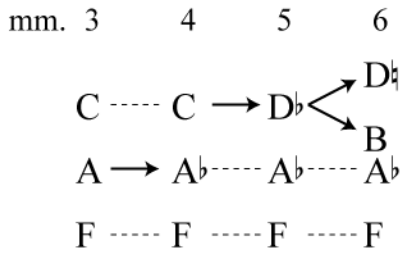


Example 2: Measures 1–6 from the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony showing many significant ideas ripe with implication.

The most discussed feature of these measures is the "frei aber froh" motto presented here first in the upper voices from mm. 1–3 (F_5–$A♭_5$–F_6) and then in the lower voices from mm. 3–5 (F_1–$A♭_1$–F_2). The motto spans an octave and generates the intervals of a minor third and a major sixth. The introduction of the A♭ at such an early stage in the work suggests the minor mode and implies that future key centers might not appear as expected for a symphony in the major mode. If there were any doubt about the importance of the minor mode, it is literally stated in m. 4 with a minor triad in first inversion. The "frei aber froh" motto also implies that there is an importance on scale degree flat-three ($\hat{♭3}$), or chromatic mediant, that might manifest itself in

some way as functionally significant. Another important feature of these opening measures is the major sonority built on flat-six ($\hat{\flat 6}$), or chromatic submediant, found in m. 5. Both its remoteness to the major mode and its arrival through $\hat{\flat 3}$ in m. 4 strike the listener with implication. Finally, the common-tone diminished seventh chords built on F in mm. 2 and 6 are memorable for their strange dominant-like quality. Furthermore, the lack of any dominant chord in the opening measures gives the listener some cause for concern. The first of only a few true dominants in F major happens much later in m. 13–14. All of these features have implications for the harmonic landscape of the exposition, in particular, and the movement as a whole.

Another feature found in the opening measures ripe implications for the rest of the piece is stepwise voice-leading. Example 3 suggests a schematic voice-leading pattern of stepwise motion:

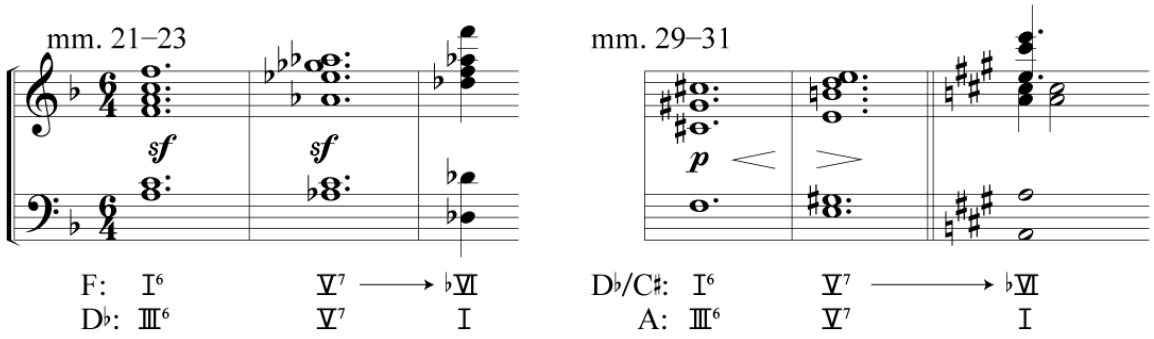


Example 3: Stepwise voice-leading in mm. 3–6 from the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

Brahms uses one or two note transformations to guide voices into remote harmonic sonorities. This implies that he will do this later in the piece to achieve modulations or create areas of harmonic instability.

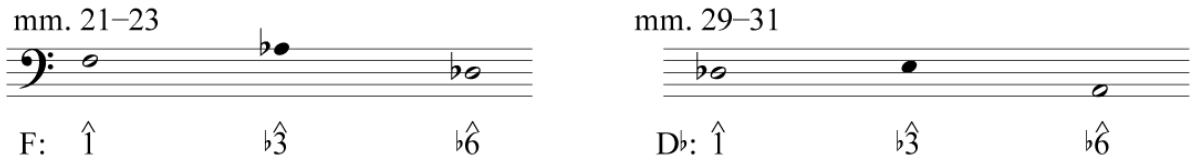
The first modulation in the exposition occurs between mm. 21–23, moving from F major to D♭ major. This short-lived key center acts as a transition between the first and second theme groups. The modulation from F major to D♭ major establishes a pattern that Brahms uses again

when he modulates from D♭ major to A major in mm. 29–31. Example 4 compares these two modulations:



Example 4: Two similar modulations in the exposition from the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

These modulations realize several implications from the opening measures. First, the motto (F–A♭–F) appears in the upper voice of the first modulation unaltered. It is also present in the second modulation transposed to C♯–E–C♯. Second, the modulations both move to the chromatic submediant of the previous key center. When further reduced, as in Example 5, this relationship becomes even more apparent:

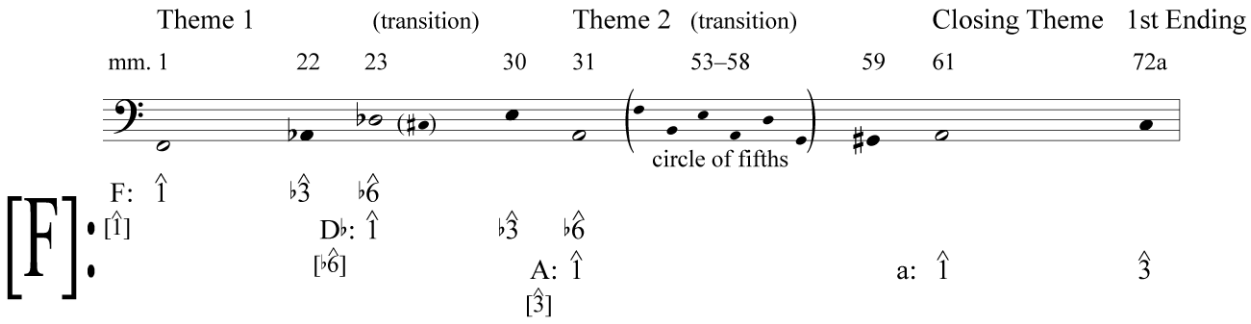


Example 5: The use of the chromatic mediant to modulate to the chromatic submediant in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

Both modulations rely on ♭3̂ to effect a change of key to ♭6̂. The mediant and submediant here reflect both their usage in the work's opening and the intervals of a third and a sixth generated by the motto. These modulations present a predicament: the second theme group is in the key of A major, a distantly related key to F major. This has implications for the recapitulation where

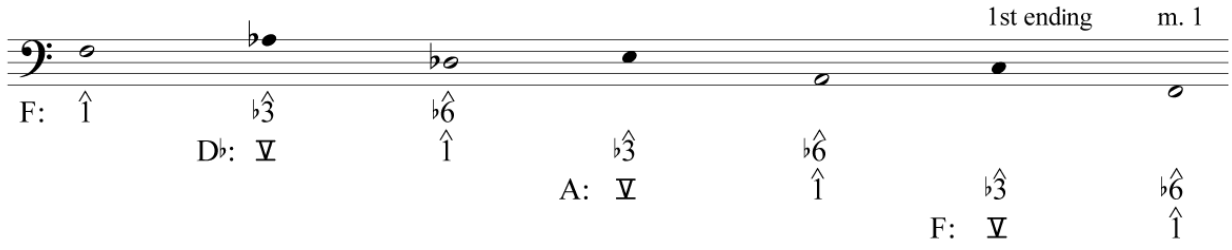
our normative sonata form says that the second theme group should be in the tonic. As we will see, Brahms both frustrates and fulfills the tension created by this expectation.

Following the completion of the second theme group in m. 48, a short interlude recalling the opening material leads into an unstable harmonic area that traverses the circle of fifths (mm. 59–60). This unstable area both prolongs the arrival of the closing thematic group and flips the mode of the key from A major to A minor. Example 6 shows a reduction of the harmonic motion throughout the exposition:



Example 6: Large-scale harmonic motion in the exposition from the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

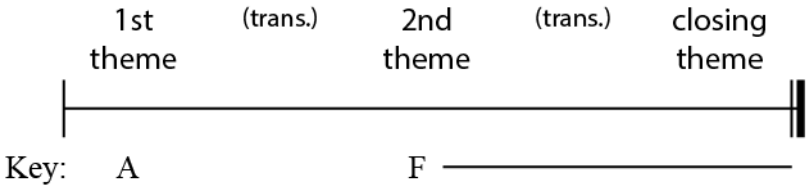
Seen from a distance, the key centers of the exposition reveal the importance of the mediant and submediant in relation to an overriding F major. Brahms's system of key centers, each the submediant of the previous suggests that the modulation back to F major in the first ending completes the cycle:



Example 7: First ending and repeated exposition as a completion of a chromatic mediant-submediant cycle in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

Interestingly, Brahms uses a unison C♮ in m. 72a, the mediant of A minor and dominant of F major, to initiate the reiteration of the exposition. While the relationships created in the exposition challenge the sonata form model by modulating to a distant key center, Brahms's internal coherences also establish mediant-submediant processes that generate their own set of expectations: the development will likely use these mediant-submediant processes to navigate through a series of unstable keys to arrive back at the tonic[1]; the recapitulation will likely use these processes to place the second theme group in the tonic. As noted earlier, these expectations of recurrence cause a great deal of tension: tension because the sonata form is being challenged, and tension because Brahms's processes pose a predicament for the recapitulation.

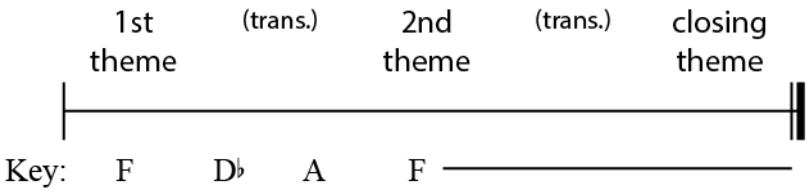
It might be helpful to hypothesize how Brahms could incorporate his chromatic mediant-submediant process in the recapitulation to fulfill expectations regarding the key center of the second theme group. One simple solution would be to begin the recapitulation in A major and modulate to F major for the second theme group:



Example 8: Hypothetical recapitulation #1 for the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

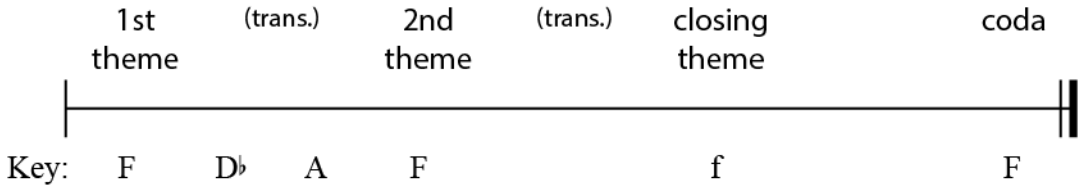
1. This is exactly what happens, but it falls outside of the scope of this paper. In short, Brahms quickly modulates to C♯ minor (m. 77) and then uses the chromatic submediant A major and the circle of fifths to arrive at G major (m. 94). From there, he uses stepwise voice-leading to get to E♭ major (m. 101), the chromatic submediant of G. The retransition involves the chromatic mediant of E♭, G♭ major (m. 107), the chromatic submediant C♭ major (m. 114), and an augmented sixth chord (m. 119) to arrive back in F major for the recapitulation (m. 120).

Presenting the first theme group in a different key has some precedent, but it perhaps solves one problem by creating another. A second solution would be to use the original modulations from the exposition and add an additional modulation to bring the key center back around to tonic:



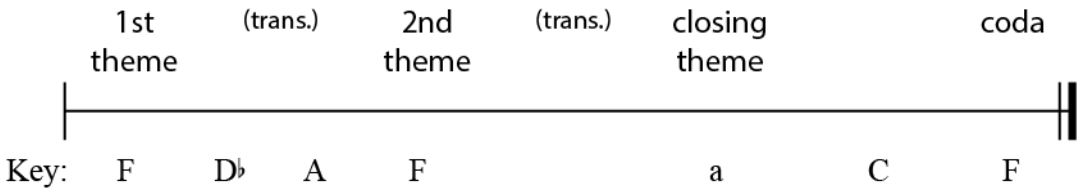
Example 9: Hypothetical recapitulation #2 for the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

This solution is elegant because it allows the composer to reuse expository material and simply expand the transition to accommodate an additional modulation. One issue that it does not address is the minor mode of the closing theme. A simple mode switch to F minor might work but would require an additional coda to end properly in major:



Example 10: Hypothetical recapitulation #3 for the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

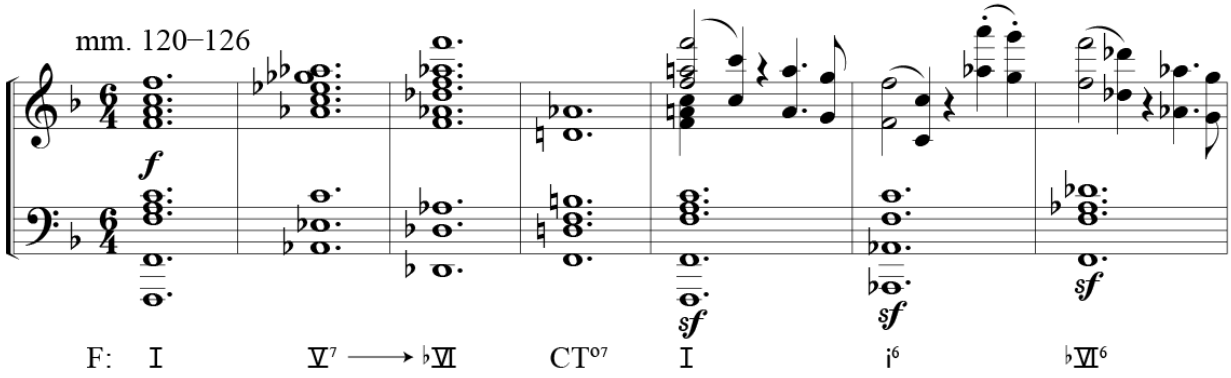
We might expect the bridge from the closing theme to the coda to resemble the first ending of the exposition. In this case, it is imaginable that the closing theme is in a key that allows for a meaningful $\hat{3}$ to connect with F major:



Example 11: Hypothetical recapitulation #4 for the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

Borrowing the same key center from the exposition's closing theme would work in this example. In any case, if these hypothetical schemes for a recapitulation demonstrate anything, they show that some solutions exist that satisfy expectations for both our normative sonata form and Brahms's mediant-submediant process.

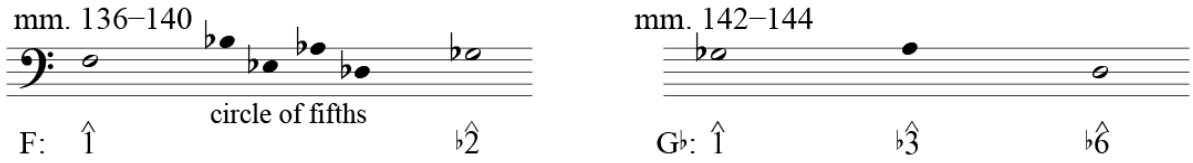
The actual recapitulation fulfills some of those expectations. The first few bars recall the opening of the movement:



Example 12: Measures 120–126 from the recapitulation of the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

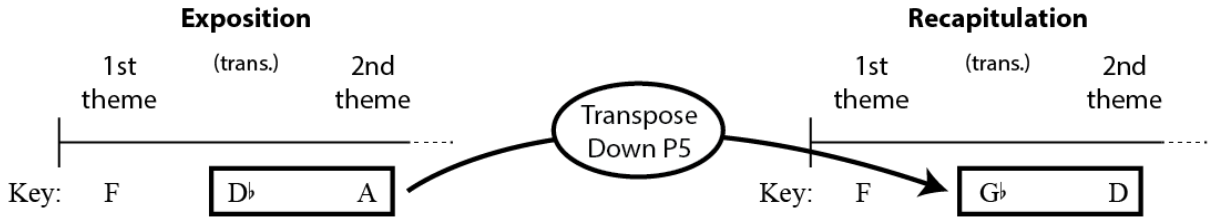
Measures 1–2 are expanded in the recapitulation to include both the mediant and submediant harmonies along with the dominant-like common-tone diminished seventh. In addition, the F–A♭–F motto and first theme group return as before. The first sign of deviation is m. 138 where a circle of fifths modulation temporarily lands in G♭ major. Though short-lived, this key center

corresponds to D♭ major in the exposition. As D♭ major was a stepping stone to A major in mm. 23–30 in the exposition, so G♭ major simply enables Brahms to use a mediant-submediant process to arrive in D major:



Example 13: Two modulations in the recapitulation of the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

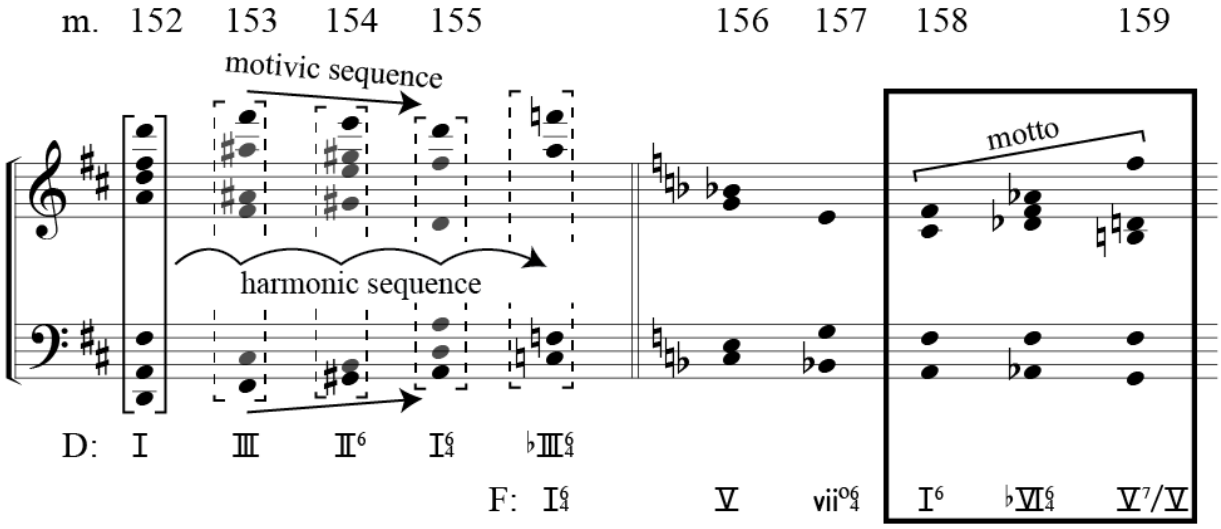
These modulations and resulting key centers present the listener with some frustration. That G♭ is the lowered supertonic of F, and D major the diatonic submediant, appears to be a meaningless relationship. With some interpretation, however, this is potentially a fulfillment of sonata expectations for the second theme group. Many classical models of the sonata in a major key present the second theme in the dominant during the exposition and in the tonic during the recapitulation. In adhering to the model, the transposition of the second theme from exposition (dominant) to recapitulation (tonic) is a perfect fifth below. Brahms mirrors this expected transposition relationship between the exposition and recapitulation:



Example 14: Transposition between secondary key centers in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

While Brahms satisfies a dominant-tonic transposition relationship in his recapitulation, the fact that the secondary theme is presented in D major and not F major remains a major source of tension.

One way that Brahms addresses expectation of the secondary theme group in the tonic is through a new modulation from D major to F major in mm. 152–158. The corresponding interlude between the secondary and closing themes in the exposition (mm. 45–49) did not modulate. Importantly, the music at m. 158 and following contains a brief recurrence of the opening bars now made rich in meaning by being presented in the tonic key:

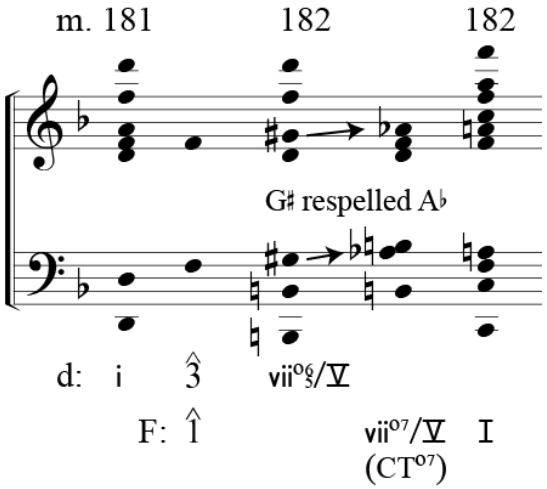


Example 15: Measures 152–159 showing an important modulation to the tonic in the recapitulation that did not occur in the exposition of the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

The modulation to F major includes a contracting motivic sequence in the outer voices that breaks its pattern on beat six of m. 155 to jump abruptly up to an F major triad in second inversion. In addition, mm. 152–155 exhibit a harmonic sequence that steps upward from a D major sonority, to E major, and finally to F major. After dominant preparation in mm. 156–157, the *dolce* statement in mm. 158–159 recalls the opening bars with both the motto and the

use of the chromatic submediant now in F major. This is what suffices for a return to the tonic needed to satisfy expectations of sonata form. While this is a critically important moment as the realization of the tonic in close proximity to the second theme group, Brahms's lack of a true tonic presentation of either the second theme itself, or the closing theme, creates a highly-charged tension that demands to be resolved.

The closing theme, now in D minor via a sequence-based modulation away from F major (mm. 160–167), ends in a similar fashion to the first ending of the exposition. The transition from the closing theme to the coda uses, as anticipated, scale-degree $\hat{3}$ as its pivot:

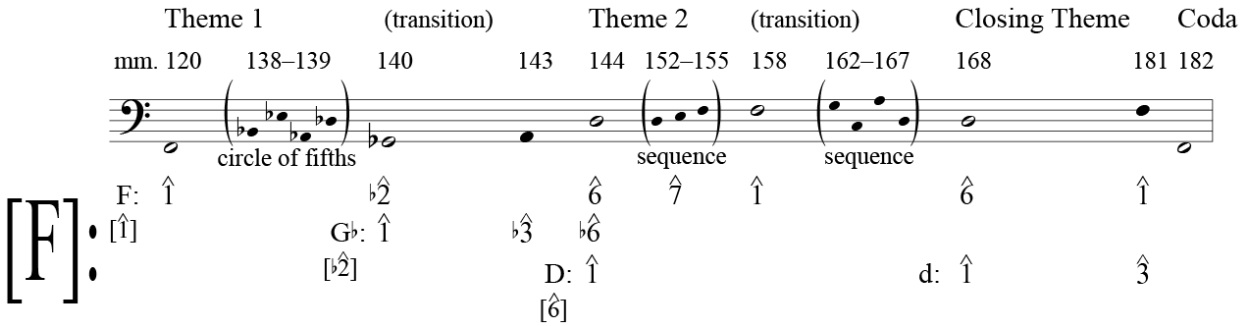


Example 16: The modulation from D minor to F major via scale-degree 3 at the transition into the coda in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

However, unlike our hypothesized coda transition (see Example 11), Brahms uses a unison F♮, $\hat{3}$ of D minor. This unfolds into an extended diminished seventh sonority before landing in F major for the start of the coda. The diminished seventh functions in a multiplicity of ways. First, it relates to D minor as a diminished seventh built on G♯. The subsequent sonority is respelled with an A♭ to act as a common-tone diminished seventh in F major. This dominant-like

chord is a satisfying way to link D minor to F major, realizing the many implications of that sonority that came before.

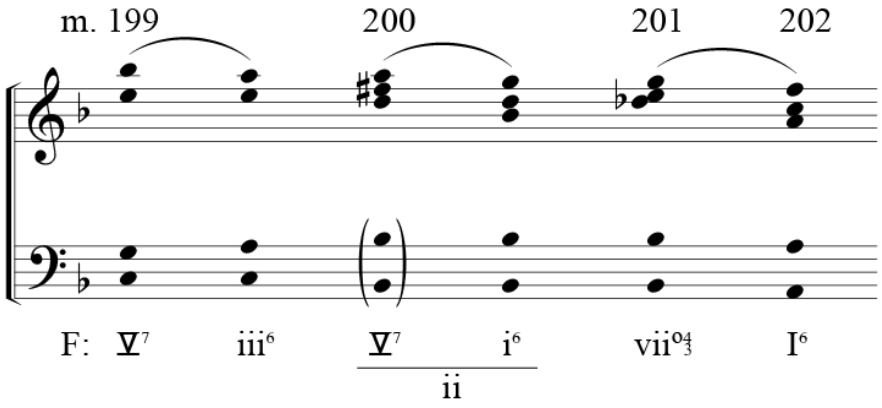
A reduction of the harmonic motion throughout the recapitulation summarizes the way that Brahms frustrates and fulfills expectations:



Example 17: Large-scale harmonic motion in the recapitulation from the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

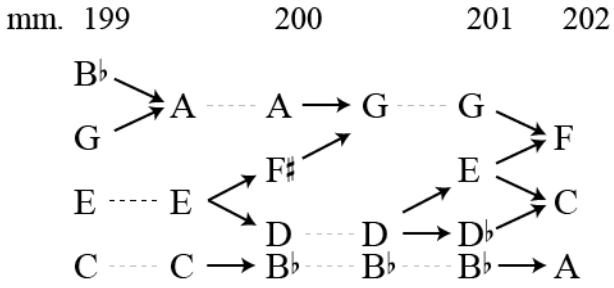
In addition to comments above that should be reevaluated in light of a comparison between Examples 6 and 17, I hear Brahms using different structural processes in the recapitulation than he did in the exposition. The two sequences stand out as new processes. The sequence from mm. 152–155 is a functionally active version of the similar but inert sequence from the exposition in mm. 43–46, and the sequence from mm. 162–167 is a new idea that replaces the circle of fifths progression from the exposition in mm. 53–59. Finally, the deep structural mediant-submediant processes in both the exposition and development are mostly relegated to surface figures in the recapitulation.

The coda functions to resolve some outstanding issues in the recapitulation. After an agitated chromatic sequence from mm. 187–194, Brahms begins oscillating between dominant and subdominant sonorities climaxing in mm. 199–202:



Example 18: A harmonic reduction of the coda's climax in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

This series of suspensions results in a *fortissimo* diminished seventh harmony built on $\hat{7}$ of F major. This sonority is the realization of implications related to the common-tone diminished seventh chord throughout the movement. The fact that it resolves to a first inversion triad admittedly weakens the effect, but the stepwise voice-leading of the section more than corroborate this moment's importance:



Example 19: Stepwise voice-leading in mm. 199–202 from the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony.

While more elaborate than Example 3, the fluidity of the harmonic progression recalls the voice-leading of mm. 3–6 and similar passages in the recapitulation.

The final moment of tension occurs in mm. 218–219 with one last statement of the common-tone diminished seventh built on the tonic and the F–A♭–F motto. The coda does not address the mediant-submediant processes missing in the recapitulation, leaving related expectations in a state of tension. The coda does resolve the tension between the modes, major triumphing over minor through both voice-leading and a true dominant diminished seventh chord. Brahms apparently reverses his established processes between the first half (exposition and development) and second half (recapitulation and coda) of the Third Symphony. This reversal can feel like a betrayal or it can be viewed, as Meyer suggests, as a purposeful turning point in the work:

> What the listener really doubts is the manner in which a sometimes only dimly envisaged goal will be reached. He has a general feeling as to what the final goal of the series is, but he is uncertain as to how the present process will get him there and what detours and obstacles will be encountered en route. And it is only at the point of "reversal," the point at which the process is broken and another mode of continuation takes its place, that the listener finally is able to envisage his goal with any degree of security. It is thus the point of reversal of process which constitutes the climax and turning point…the point at which doubt and anxiety are replaced by more certain anticipation. (Meyer: 171)

In addition to a purposefulness of process reversal, Brahms challenges his listener's conception of sonata form. By not conforming his second theme group to normative models, Brahms creates a tension that begs to be resolved in a coda. This study ends with the first movement, but an investigation into the remaining movements of his Third Symphony might reveal even broader connections with expectations generated in this movement.

Works Cited

Meyer, Leonard. (1956) *Emotion and Meaning in Music.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.