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Canons and Contestable Cadences in Brahms's Op. 118 No. 4

Abstract

Brahms's F minor Intermezzo, Op. 118 No. 4 prominently employs the fusty compositional technique of strict canon at the octave. Yet Brahms embeds this canon in music that is anything but fusty: as I demonstrate, unexpected features abound in the textures, dissonance treatment, modulatory schemes, and motives with which Brahms girds the canon. The movement's approach to cadences is also remarkable. The presence of a continuous canon automatically precludes all voices coming to rest simultaneously, but Brahms further attenuates the piece's cadences. Most notably, in this movement Brahms avoids traditional authentic-cadence closure entirely, writing not a single cadential progression from a root-position C major chord to a root-position F chord. Instead, I argue that Brahms effects tonal closure by using the augmented sixth chord, which supplants the dominant's usual function. He does this most obviously by repeating the augmented sixth sonority in prominent positions within the ternary form's final A section. I also show that Brahms artfully foreshadows this chord's importance in the initial A section, where he successively tonicizes each member of that harmony.

Keywords

Brahms, canon, augmented sixth, cadence

MUSIC THEORY & ANALYSIS

International Journal of the Dutch-Flemish Society for Music Theory

VOLUME 8, # 1, APRIL 2021, 143–151

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<https://doi.org/10.11116/MTA.8.1.7>

Canons and Contestable Cadences in Brahms's Op. 118 No. 4

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Brahms's F minor Intermezzo, Op. 118 No. 4, is primarily known, inasmuch as it is known at all, for its composer's extensive employment of canonic techniques.¹ Brahms takes the dowdy compositional principle of a canon at the octave and employs it in ways that differ substantially from canonic norms in earlier centuries. In a similar fashion, Brahms also plays with traditional norms of how cadences and closure work in tonal music. This vignette will consider both of these aspects in turn.

The most prominent canonic disposition in the movement is a strict canon at the octave below, displaced by half a measure. This particular canon is present in more than four-fifths of the piece, with the remaining portion (mm. 17–38) composed of a significantly looser inverted canon. Perhaps the most immediately apparent innovation is the harmonic complexity Brahms introduces in the B section (mm. 52–99): through a series of common-tone modulations the music progresses through a hexatonic system, from C major (as the dominant of F minor) to the keys of A \flat and E major, and then back to the C major triad.²

The opening of the movement presents another manifestation of the canon that has markedly different innovations, of which we will focus on two. Rather than creating an adventurous harmonic progression, Brahms crafts a *dux* which (1) creates dissonance and a fragmented texture by means of its intervallic and metric structuring and (2) is embedded within a motivically complex fabric. First, the intervals between successive notes of the beginning of the *dux* are rather unorthodox. Whereas the *dux* in a conventional canon at the octave is primarily constructed of intervals that result in consonances between the canonic voices (such as thirds, sixths, and ascending fifths), Brahms chooses ascending fourths and a descending seventh for the start of his *dux* voice. This creates counterpoint

1 The most notable, though brief, treatment of the work in recent years is by Steven Rings, who focuses on its canonic construction; Rings, "The Learned Self: Artifice in Brahms's Late Intermezzi," in *Expressive Intersections in Brahms: Essays in Analysis and Meaning*, ed. Peter H. Smith and Heather A. Platt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 43–45.

2 Specifically, a T₇-generated co-cycle of the Northern hexatonic system, in Richard Cohn's terminology; see Cohn, "Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic Systems, and the Analysis of Late-Romantic Triadic Progressions," *Music Analysis* 15/1 (1996), 17–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/854168>.

Example 1: Canonic voices in mm. 1–5

I V⁶ I V₃ I⁶ II⁷ V⁵/V V $\frac{4}{2}$ I

between the canonic voices that, on its own, would be highly unsatisfactory, replete with unresolved elevenths and even a major second (Example 1). Brahms, however, incorporates these dissonances into a harmonic progression that both accounts for the counterpoint and smoothly brings about a half cadence.

The metric organization of this progression and of the canon itself is also noteworthy. The *dux* voice's notes are struck on the weak beats of the 2/4 meter, while the *comes* voice enters a quarter note later, on the downbeats. The two voices' contrapuntal relationship is also metrically peculiar, since the *dux* sounds unprepared dissonances on the weak beats that are putatively "resolved" when the *comes* moves to an octave below the *dux* on the downbeats.³ Additionally, all instances of tonic harmony in the first four measures of the piece enter with the *dux* on weak beats. The downbeats of opening two measures, in contrast, contain only weak inverted dominant seventh chords that prolong the weak-beat tonic harmony.

This metrically disjointed opening is also characterized by an unusual texture created by the leaping *dux* voice. Indeed, the canonic voices in the first seven measures bear little resemblance to the normally stepwise melodies of many vocal rounds or to the figured melodies of typical octave-canonic instrumental compositions, which often feature conjunctly elaborated thirds and sixths.⁴ Instead, the texture at the beginning of the intermezzo is highly fragmented, as the pianist's right hand demonstrates clearly. As the hand shifts up and down the keyboard in the first seven measures, it suggests the activation of different textural strands, resulting in a compound polyphonic texture that is much more complex than just the two voices notated in the score's upper staff (Example 2).

The annotations in Example 2 indicate the second noteworthy feature of this intermezzo's opening: the degree to which the canon's accompaniment is motivically unified.

3 The more striking dissonances, such as the minor seventh in m. 2 and the major second in m. 3, are resolved in a more proper fashion by the accompanying voices, since the alto takes up both intervals' dissonant F and resolves to E \sharp in m. 4.

4 See, e.g., Robert Schumann's *Studien für Pedal-Flügel*, Op. 56, in which the first and sixth have canons at the octave that are dominated by thirds and sixths. The first study, in particular, has a *dux* that is composed almost exclusively of figured descending thirds.

Example 2: Mm. 1–12 with annotations

The musical score for Example 2 consists of three systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 1-4) shows a descending tetrachord in the right hand (A \flat -G-F-E) and an ascending tetrachord in the left hand (C-D \flat -D \flat -E \flat). Annotations include a beam and the label 'χ' under the first measure, and a beam and the label 'R(χ)' under the second measure. Roman numerals 'i', 'ii', and 'V' are placed below the first, second, and fourth measures respectively. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the pattern, with 'R(χ)' annotated under measure 5. The third system (measures 9-12) shows further development of the motifs, with 'V $\frac{5}{3}$ ' annotated under measure 10.

In the first measures, for instance, the highest accompanying voice descends through a conjunct tetrachord (bounded by a diminished fourth from A \flat to E), which Example 2 indicates with a beam and the label 'χ'.⁵ One beat later the lowest voice initiates an ascent through the same tetrachord, beamed and labeled 'R(χ)'. In the following measures the highest accompanying voice takes up this idea of an ascending chromatic four-note line, but alters it to fit the changed harmonic context. The most significant tweak is the newly diatonic nature of the span which the four notes traverse: instead of the diminished fourth of the b motive, the new version (C–D \flat –D \flat –E \flat , which Example 2 labels as R(χ)) spans a major third. The following two measures (mm. 4²–6²) contain yet another

5 The motivic readings proposed here do assume a certain degree of freedom with respect to Brahms's figuration, in that they sometimes emphasize the initial notes in triplet figures and other times the triplets' middle notes; an implied tone is also necessary in m. 5. Yet the smooth voice leading which the readings assume, along with the concentration of E \flat –F–G–A \flat lines, are much preferable to an interpretation that is mechanically derived from metrically accented notes.

instance of the $R(\chi)$ motive in the alto voice, except this time the second note (F) is present solely in the bass voice, being merely implied in the alto. By m. 7, however, the *dux* voice rejects its unconventional leaps for a more traditional melody, in which the *dux* both aligns with the notated metre and also contains passing notes elaborating a conventional series of descending thirds.⁶ In mm. 9–11, Brahms even adds another nod to compositional practices of yore by featuring a fauxbourdon texture above a static bass.

Let us now turn to the second subject of this vignette: the manner in which cadences are attenuated and contested throughout the movement. In part this cadential weakening results from the canonic technique Brahms employs: the quarter-note displacement between the canonic voices consistently prevents the formation of moments in which all voices come to rest simultaneously. For instance, in mm. 11–12 (see the end of Example 2) the inner voices resolve to the half-cadential dominant chord in the second half of m. 11, even though the bass voice does not arrive on the chordal root until the beginning of m. 12. Brahms attenuates that half cadence even more by adding a seventh to the dominant chord and by overlapping the start of the next phrase's accompanying melody (at m. 11²) with the moment of cadential arrival. Furthermore, the pedal on $\hat{2}$ which underlies mm. 9–11² (along with the $D\flat$ above) suggests that the half cadence will be strengthened via a strong V/V predominant chord. Brahms, in contrast, initially withholds $B\flat$, the would-be leading tone of the tonicized dominant, and then in m. 10 provides $B\flat$ instead, transforming the expected $V/V-V$ progression into a less charged $ii-V$ half cadence.

Most notably, over the course of the intermezzo, none of the many cadences is an authentic progression from a root-position C major chord to a root-position F minor triad. Indeed, root-position F minor chords are in short supply throughout the movement, particularly at phrase endings. Of the numerous cadences in the piece, there are three main types: half cadences to the global dominant, authentic cadences within sequential, modulating passages, and unusual cadences to the global tonic. Half cadences are preponderant: the first three cadences in the movement (at mm. 4, 12, and 16) are all half cadences, and the progression which ends the first A section of the ternary form, in mm. 46–47, is also a tonicized half cadence.⁷ In addition, the piece's B section concludes with a rather unusual progression derived from a tonicized half cadence (mm. 95–99) in which a

6 Note that the canonic voices of mm. 8–10 taken alone suggest a descending arpeggiation by thirds through an F-rooted seventh chord, with D, $B\flat$, and G being passing notes. The greater harmonic context, in contrast, instead emphasizes a G minor chord, thereby reversing the roles of chord tone and neighbour note.

7 One could also consider the movement as a whole to be in a five-part rondo form, with mm. 39–51 being the reprise section (part 3), distinct from the preceding parts 1 (mm. 1–12) and 2 (mm. 13–38). Yet in this reading part 4 (mm. 52–99) is practically the same length as the entirety of parts 1–3. Thus, for reasons of symmetry I prefer a ternary reading of the piece's overall form, with mm. 1–51 exhibiting a nested ternary structure.

first-inversion G dominant seventh chord proceeds to a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ chord, suggesting a dominant arrival, yet the $\frac{6}{4}$ chord never resolves to the expected $\frac{5}{3}$ sonority.

Conventional authentic cadences do occur in the piece, but they are restricted to sequential passages. The B section of the piece (mm. 52–99) is the most prominent home for these authentic cadences. There Brahms takes the melodic-harmonic model of mm. 52–60, which ends with an imperfect authentic cadence in $A\flat$ major, and copies it (with minor registral tweaks) in E major (mm. 68–76) and C major (mm. 76–84), each iteration concluding with an IAC that overlaps with the start of the following phrase. (Mm. 60–68 essentially prolong the $A\flat$ major chord established at the end of the preceding phrase and thus function merely as an interpolation into the otherwise sequential mm. 52–84.) Authentic-cadential progressions also occur in the intermezzo's other sequential passage: the central third of the initial A section (mm. 12–38). This section begins with a repetition of the piece's initial four measures, making it sound like a consequent to the first twelve measures' expanded antecedent construction. The ensuing music, however, dissolves this suggestion of a consequent phrase by turning to new material. As previously mentioned, mm. 17–38 eschew the movement's predominant canon-at-the-octave in favor of a more loosely realized inverted canon, with the *dux* in the pianist's right hand and the *comes* in the left. The initial four measures of this material (mm. 17–20) establish a model of sorts for the following sequential repetition; they begin with an ascending four-note chromatic line in the top voice (C– $D\flat$ – $D\sharp$ – $E\flat$, an altered form of the $R(\chi)$ ' motive which the alto carries in the preceding two measures), and conclude with an authentic cadence on an F major chord (Example 3). In the succeeding loose restatements of the model, the ascending chromatic line is transferred to the bass (F– $G\flat$ – $G\sharp$ – $A\flat$, then $A\flat$ – $B\flat$ – $B\sharp$ – $C\flat$), while the top voice descends conjunctly through a perfect fourth (F– $E\flat$ – $D\flat$ –C, then $A\flat$ – $G\flat$ – $F\flat$ – $E\flat$), which is reminiscent of the movement's opening χ motive. Both sequential repetitions conclude with perfect-authentic-cadential progressions, in the keys of $A\flat$ major and B major, respectively. Yet because this passage consists of a phrase and its transposed restatements, any sense of meaningful cadential function at the phrases' endings is promptly attenuated by the “one more time”-like effect of the music's continuation.

Example 3: Reduction of sequence in mm. 16–28

This series of sequential repetitions leads to a remarkable compositional feat. The B major chord of m. 28 proceeds, by way of a passing C dominant seventh chord, to a D \flat major triad, which Brahms transforms into an augmented sixth chord in m. 37. Yet this is not just any augmented sixth chord: it is composed of precisely those bass notes which Brahms has emphasized through the cadences of the preceding sequence. In essence, all of mm. 20–38—practically the entire middle third of the A section—can be understood as a harmonic foreshadowing of the augmented sixth chord with which it concludes (see the bracket under the staff in Example 3). This chord then resolves to a $\hat{6}_4$ chord built on $\hat{5}$, above which is a reprise of the intermezzo's beginning. This material's earlier iterations had been supported by tonic prolongation, but here, as is not unusual for Brahms, the thematic return occurs over dominant harmony instead. The augmented sixth chord of mm. 36–38 serves to reinterpret the relative priorities of tonic and dominant in the reprise, recasting m. 39's $\hat{6}_4$ chord as a dominant cadential $\hat{6}_4$ rather than an inverted tonic. Thus mm. 38–39 add yet another half cadence (though a highly charged, chromaticized one) to the A section's tally, before the section concludes with yet another tonicized half cadence at mm. 46–47.

In the final A section of the ternary form (mm. 100–133) traditional tonic-dominant relations become even weaker. After beginning with an intensified recapitulation of the opening material, which includes the now-familiar half cadence in the fourth measure (mm. 102–103), the rest of the piece has startlingly few C major or F minor triads. Instead, Brahms keeps returning to the progression that approaches a $\hat{6}_4$ chord built on $\hat{5}$ via an augmented sixth chord—yet more appearances of the very harmony which he elaborates via sequence in the first A section. This chord recurs thrice in the final A section, at mm. 107, 115, and 123. As mentioned earlier, the A section begins with a heightened form of the piece's first four measures (in mm. 100–103), but the parallelism does not stop there. Mm. 108–111² are an almost exact transposition of mm. 9–12² (the fauxbourdon material) up a perfect fourth, and the intervening measures (mm. 104–107) resemble their corresponding measures from the piece's beginning, but altered to set up the transposition of the ensuing material. Significantly for our purposes, this alteration includes approaching m. 108's pedal on $\hat{5}$ from above, via the augmented sixth chord, whereas m. 8 approached the pedal from below, by means of a diminished seventh chord. Mm. 108–110 mirror their corresponding iteration at mm. 9–11 in that they also suggest the presence of a dominant prolongation, but they are undercut by Brahms's use of the subtonic scale degree instead of the leading tone. Similarly, m. 110's cadence is weakened just like the would-be tonicized half cadence of m. 11, with inversion, withholding of the leading tone, and motivic overlap all in play.

Example 4: Closing material, mm. 123–135

Mm. 111–114 continue in an unexpected way by locking onto a tonic pedal while introducing highly unstable, chromatic material atop that fixates on the motivic material from mm. 11²–13. The lock is finally broken by none other than the augmented sixth chord, which appears again in m. 115. The following eight measures largely repeat the previous eight, with one important difference: the fauxbourdon material is replaced with a new canonic melody, which is supported by an accompaniment that undulates between strong-beat cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ harmonies and weak-beat dominant $\frac{5}{3}$ chords. As a result, the cadence in m. 118, though still undercut by inversions and motivic overlapping, is stronger than the preceding iteration in m. 110.

This leads to a repeat of the tonic-lock material down an octave, and then the final iteration of the augmented sixth chord in m. 123. This chord is the most crucial of the three, since it seems to substitute for the perfect authentic cadence which one would expect to conclude the intermezzo. The chord again resolves to a $\frac{6}{4}$ chord built on $\hat{5}$ (Example 4). This time, however, the $\frac{6}{4}$ chord's function is altered: the ensuing arpeggiation down to the (rare) root position reveals the $\frac{6}{4}$ chord to be clearly tonic in function. Appended to this tonic is the final progression in the piece (mm. 127–129), a plagal cadence resolving to the major tonic, with a sixth added above the subdominant's fifth in the manner of Rameau's chord of the *sixte ajoutée*.⁸ While this cadence is much more conventional, with root-position chords and a traditionally cadential progression, I hear it as exhibiting a post-cadential, "amen"-like effect, which retrospectively casts mm. 123–124's augmented

8 Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Traité de l'harmonie reduite à ses principes naturels* (Paris: Ballard, 1722), 64.

sixth to tonic progression as the movement's real closure. And indeed, while both of these cadences exhibit the plagal characteristic of motion from $\hat{6}$ to $\hat{5}$, only the progression of augmented sixth to tonic has an ascending semitone ($B\flat$ to C) in its voice leading. Thus, the augmented sixth chord which Brahms prolongs early in the piece returns at the end to serve as a quasi-authentic cadence, confirmed by the final plagal motion. Therefore, as the piece concludes, we come to understand that the augmented sixth chord is even more important than had earlier been suggested. That is because in this piece, a larger authentic whole does not subsume plagal sections, as is the norm in Brahms's treatment of plagal systems;⁹ instead, the augmented sixth chord comes to supplant the dominant as the primary agent of tonal closure.

9 See, e.g., Heather Platt, "Unrequited Love and Unrealized Dominants," *Integral* 7 (1993), 119–48; and Margaret Notley, "Plagal Harmony as Other: Asymmetrical Dualism and Instrumental Music by Brahms," *Journal of Musicology* 22/1 (2005), 90–130, especially 114, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2005.22.1.90>.

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About the Author

Caleb Mutch is a visiting postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. He has been a postdoctoral research fellow and visiting assistant professor at Indiana University, and prior to that he served as a lecturer at Columbia University, where he also completed a Ph.D. in music theory. His topics of study include the history of music theory from antiquity to the Romantic era, the formal analysis of baroque and classical music, and transcultural collaboration in popular music. His research is published in journals including *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Theory & Practice*, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, and the *Journal of Mathematics and Music*.