

Brahms's Use of the Hand Horn in the Trio, Op. 40

by Peter Silberman

Although the valved horn gradually replaced the hand horn during the nineteenth century, Brahms continued to write for the older instrument.¹ Brahms's composition that features the hand horn most prominently is the Trio, Op. 40, written in 1865, whose original title page reads "*für Violine, Waldhorn, und Klavier.*" This work is difficult to perform on the hand horn, as in some sections it strays far from the open notes of the horn in E^b, necessitating multiple stopped notes. The stopped notes both make the work more awkward for the horn player and change the sound of the instrument, sometimes dramatically. The hand horn thus seems an unusual choice for such a chromatic composition. This might lead one to wonder whether there are effects in the music that only can be heard if the Trio is performed on hand horn. In particular, the changes in sound from open to stopped notes might enhance a performance rather than detract from it.

This article will discuss Brahms's writing for the hand horn in the Trio, focusing on his use of the contrast between open and stopped tone colors for musical effect. I will show that Brahms employed the hand horn's timbral characteristics in four ways: enhancing and assisting with dynamics; emphasizing important pitches; constructing melodic motives, and organizing keys and form.² Interested readers may wish to study the musical examples by listening to either of two excellent recordings of the Trio using authentic mid-nineteenth century instruments, Lowell Greer's recording on *Harmonia Mundi* and Andrew Clark's on *EMI Classics*.³ The tone color effects discussed in this article are more noticeable in Clark's recording.

Both Brahms, who was a pianist, and his father, a professional double bassist, also played the horn. Brahms may have become more interested in the horn due to his friendship with August Cordes, a hornist, whom Brahms met in 1857. Stephen Seiffert speculates that the Trio might have been written with Cordes in mind, and Cordes later played the work with Brahms.⁴ The Trio was written in 1865 and premiered in December of that year in Karlsruhe, Austria. Brahms played the piano at the first performance and the hornist Segisser played a hand horn. Six of the first seven performances of the work were played on a hand horn, including all with the composer at the piano.⁵

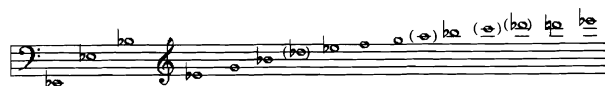
Much has been written about the Trio's well-known third movement, which contains a striking appearance of a folksong-like melody at measure 59, foreshadowing the main melody of the fourth movement. According to several authors, the presence of this folksong suggests that the movement was written in memory of Brahms's mother, who died in early 1865.⁶ Asher Treat identifies the folksong as "*Hoch auf dem gelben Waben*" ("High on the Yellow Coach"), in which a mail coach, greeted by the sound of a horn, is a metaphor for death.⁷ David Elliott identifies it as "*Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus*" ("There in the Meadow Stands a House"), supposedly taught to Brahms by

his mother.⁸ The Trio's key of E^b (both major and minor modes appear) is also the key of two of Brahms's other works from the 1860s that refer to death and/or motherhood, the central movement of the *Requiem* and the *Lullaby*.⁹ In contrast, David Moseley suggests that the third movement describes Brahms's relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann, based on the imagery of the text of "*Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus*," and on the use of musical motives also found in Schumann's music.¹⁰

Before turning to my analysis of the Trio, I will briefly review which notes can be played open and which must be stopped on the hand horn. Example 1 shows the harmonic series with a fundamental of E^b, all the open notes.¹¹ Four notes, shown in parentheses, are slightly flat. In performance, removing the hand from the bell raises both D's and the A; I will consider them to be open in my discussion of tone color. The C is usually played as a stopped note to correct its intonation.

Example 1

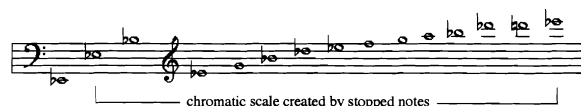
Harmonic series on E^b



Stopping can produce a note either a half step or a whole step below an open note (or even more in the low register), thus filling in the gaps in the harmonic series. A complete chromatic scale can be produced starting on the second note of the harmonic series. Example 2 shows open notes in E^b. Any note not appearing in this example would be played stopped.¹² The line underneath the staff shows the range of the chromatic scale created by the addition of stopped notes. The Trio is written for horn in E^b, and so the score, from which I will quote, shows the horn part as if it were written in C. Example 3 shows the open notes and range of the stopped notes from Example 2 transposed to C.

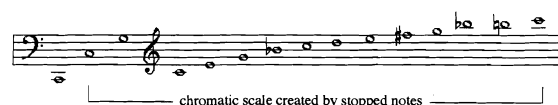
Example 2

Open notes in E^b and range of stopped notes



Example 3

Open notes in C and range of stopped notes





The following excerpts from the score will illustrate how Brahms took advantage of the hand horn's changes in tone color to enhance the Trio. I have found four categories of tone color usage and will show several examples of each from various movements. The first category is enhancing and assisting with dynamics. For example, passages in which the horn is secondary to the violin or piano and the dynamic level is *piano* or *pianissimo* often contain stopped notes to ensure that the melody is heard above the horn. Brahms commented on this feature of the work when he wrote: "If the performer is not obliged by the stopped notes to play softly the piano and violin are not obliged to adapt themselves to him, and the tone is rough from the beginning."¹³ Example 4 shows measures 57-66 from the third movement, the appearance of the folksong. The violin plays the top staff, the horn the middle one. In measures 59 and 60, where the horn plays the folksong with violin accompaniment, almost all of the horn's notes are open. The last two, identified by crosses, are stopped, causing the horn to decrescendo to allow the entry of the piano to be heard. In measures 63 and 64 the violin now plays the folksong and the horn accompanies. The dynamic level is *pianissimo*. Readers who have performed this work know how difficult it is to play softer than the *pianissimo* violin! Brahms helpfully provides the horn with a part containing mostly stopped notes (again identified by crosses), thus making it much easier to play softer than the violin melody.¹⁴

Example 4

Third movement, measures 57-66

Dynamic markings are often enhanced by the stopped tone color. Example 5 shows measures 103-106 from the first movement. The second note in measure 104 is marked *fortepiano*. This is a stopped note, and the distinction between *forte* and *piano* can be made to sound much greater on a hand horn. Stopped notes on the hand horn have two very different tone colors. When played softly, they sound muted, but when played loudly they sound brassy, like the modern usage of stopped horn. Both tone colors appear here, highlighting the change of dynamics on this one note.¹⁵ Similarly, a *fortepiano* stopped note appears in measure 83 of the third movement, shown in Example 6. This is a dramatic moment, enhanced by the stopped sound. It is positively chilling in the Greer recording.

Example 5

First movement, measures 103-106

Example 6

Third movement, measures 80-86

Example 7 shows a situation in which the change from open to stopped notes coincides with a relaxation after a climax. This is followed by an intensification leading to the return of the movement's main melody, during which the horn's notes change back from stopped to open. The example shows measures 137-160 of the fourth movement. At the beginning of this passage, the horn plays a heroic melody of mostly open notes, marked *forte*. (This dynamic marking is not shown in the example.) The melody climaxes on its last note in measure 143, which is underscored by the piano's arrival at a *forte* dynamic after a *crescendo* from *piano*. The following measures, through measure 153, give the sense of winding down after the climax. Both instruments start at a new dynamic level of *piano*, there is a *ritardando*, and the horn's pitches descend from a high register to a middle one. The piano is instructed to *diminuendo* starting in measure 147, but there is no corresponding dynamic change written in the horn part. However, the horn moves from open to stopped notes. Even if the performer maintains the same dynamic level, the change in tone color will mimic and thus match the piano's *diminuendo*, adding to the sense of relaxation after the climax.

Example 7

Fourth movement, measures 137-160

Measures 153-160 build in intensity. The horn and piano are instructed to *accelerando e crescendo poco a poco*, and the horn's sustained notes rise in pitch as do the highest notes of the piano's arpeggios. There is a corresponding change from



Example 8

Fourth movement, measures 219-227

Example 9

Fourth movement, 256-271

Example 10

First movement, measures 8-16, horn

Example 11

First movement, beginning of opening horn melody showing two motives

stopped to open notes for the horn during this passage. Further, the last two sustained notes, written C# and D, highlight the contrast between stopped and open sounds.¹⁶

Another way Brahms took advantage of stopped notes was to use them to emphasize important pitches.¹⁷ Example 8 shows measures 214-226 of the fourth movement. In measures 219 and 220, the piano plays the melodic notes A# (dissonant with the left hand chord) and B (consonant). In measures 221-227, the horn and violin continue the piano part in unison, starting with the same pitches respelled as B^b and C^b. Dissonance and consonance are now reversed; B^b is consonant and C^b is dissonant. The C^b is a *forte* stopped note, which emphasizes its dissonant quality. Similar notes in the following measures, the F natural in measure 224 and the E^bs in measures 224-226, are also stopped.¹⁸

Example 9 shows measures 256-271 of the fourth movement with two horn notes circled. There is a prominent arrival point at measure 263. Instead of arriving on the expected concert G, the horn plays a concert G^b.¹⁹ The *forte* stopped sound of this note emphasizes the surprise. When the same arrival reappears in measure 269, the horn plays a G, an open note that begins the triumphant coda.

The third way that Brahms used the horn's open and stopped notes is in constructing melodies and melodic motives. Example 10 shows the opening melody of the first movement as played by the horn in measures 8-16. This melody prominently contrasts the two tone colors. It first centers on a written D, an open note. Then, starting in measure 11, it centers on a

written A, a stopped note, before returning to D at the end. Thus, the melody is mostly open, mostly stopped, and then open again.²⁰ Further, the two melodic motives from which this melody is made also contrast open and stopped sounds. Example 11 shows the beginning of the melody. I have identified two motives, labeled X and Y. X, an interval of a fifth, contains two open notes. Y, a descent and then ascent by half step, contains a stopped note. These motives reappear throughout the work in various melodies, continuing the contrast between open and stopped sounds. Example 12 shows a sampling of



melodies from different movements, with motives X and Y identified. (In some instances X is a fourth rather than a fifth, and many Ys are one half step rather than two.) In most cases X consists of open notes, while Y contains at least one stopped note.²¹

Example 12

Horn melodies showing motives X and Y

first movement, measures 178-181



second movement, measures 81-84



third movement, measures 5-9



third movement, measures 19-20



fourth movement, measures 8-12



Finally, the keys and forms of the second and third movements of the Trio are organized to contrast the different tone colors of the hand horn. Keys with mostly open notes, such as concert E^b major, alternate with keys with mostly stopped notes. I will comment on the second movement only, where this alternation coincides more closely with the form. Example 13 shows the primary melodies of the second movement, as played by the horn, along with keys and sections of the form. The second movement is a scherzo and trio. The scherzo consists of three subsections, which I have labeled A, B, and A'.

Example 13

Second movement: horn melodies, keys, and form

SCHERZO

Section A - measure 1

horn melody A1 - measure 13, key of E^b major - open



horn melody A2 - measure 61, key of G^b major - stopped



horn melody A3 - measure 81, key of E^b major - open



Section B - measure 121

horn melody B1 - measure 121, key of B major - stopped



Section A' - measure 167

horn melody A1 - measure 167, key of E^b major - open



horn melody A2 - measure 251, key of G^b major - stopped



TRIO

horn melody - measure 287, key of A^b minor - stopped



Subsections A and A' each contain three melodies, labeled melody A1, melody A2, and melody A3.²² In the A' section, the horn plays only melodies A1 and A2.

As shown in Example 13, the first melody of the scherzo's A section is in concert E^b major, which has mostly open notes for the horn. It is followed by a melody in G^b major, containing prominent stopped notes. The first melody then returns, creating the pattern open-stopped-open. The B section, in B major, continues the pattern by featuring a stopped melody. The A section returns, shortened, providing two more melodies in this pattern, open then stopped.

One would expect an open melody to appear next due to this pattern, but the melody in the movement's trio, in A^b minor, is stopped. However, Brahms does provide contrast with the previous stopped melody by a change in dynamics. The last melody in the scherzo is played *forte*, while the trio starts with a dynamic of *piano*. This dynamic change highlights the two tone colors of stopped notes: brassy when played *forte* and muted when played *piano*. Throughout the second movement stopped melodies alternate these two tone colors. The stopped melody in the A and A' sections is brassy, while those in the B section and trio are muted.

Example 14 shows the form of the second movement with each melody identified as open or stopped. Further, each stopped melody is described as brassy or muted. This chart clearly shows the alternation of open and stopped melodies throughout the movement, along with the alternation of brassy and muted stopped sounds.

Example 14

Form of the second movement showing alternation of open and stopped melodies, muted and brassy melodies

SCHERZO

section A			section B	section A'	
A1	A2	A3	B1	A1	A2
open	stopped	open	stopped	open	stopped



TRIO
stopped
muted

SCHERZO

section A			section B	section A'	
A1	A2	A3	B1	A1	A2
open	stopped	open	stopped	open	stopped
	brassy		muted		brassy

How can a performer on the modern valve horn use the information in this article? Unlike David Sprung, I do not advocate stopping notes on the valve horn when performing works written for hand horn.²³ However, I do suggest that the performer could vary the tone color by other means, such as changing dynamic level or hand position, in situations falling into any of the four categories of stopped notes discussed above. Also, prominent stopped notes often signal something of importance in the music (I showed examples in which stopped notes are dissonant or unexpected pitches), and those notes could be brought to the listener's attention in a variety of ways besides changes in tone color. An investigation of such prominent stopped notes could yield deeper insights into the music. Further, the presence of numerous stopped notes could mean that the passage is accompaniment. This is particularly helpful in situations in which it is unclear which instrument has the melody. A combination of all of the above suggestions could help the performer craft a sensitive and interesting interpretation.²⁴

Finally, the ideas in this article could be applied to other works, or even to other instruments that interact with the horn. A performer might benefit from examining open and stopped notes in works such as the Mozart concertos and Beethoven sonata. Pianos of Brahms's day also had variations of tone color not available on modern instruments.²⁵ A careful study of Brahms's piano writing, and its interaction with the horn, could yield further ideas for interpretation.

Notes:

1. Stephen Seiffert divides Brahms's compositional output into three periods based on his writing for the horn. Before 1862 Brahms wrote exclusively for the hand horn, with the exception of the First *Serenade*, written for two hand horns and two valve horns. Between 1862 and 1881 Brahms wrote for combinations of hand and valve horns. This period includes the *Requiem*, the first and second symphonies, the violin concerto, and the second piano concerto. After 1881 Brahms wrote exclusively for the valve horn in such works as the third and fourth symphonies and the Double Concerto. See Stephen Seiffert, *Johannes Brahms and the French Horn*, D.M.A. dissertation, Eastman School of Music, 1968. For more information about the horn writing in the mid-nineteenth century see Robert Walshe, "The Transition from Hand Horn to Valve Horn in Germany," *The Horn Call* 17/1 (1986): 25-26.

2. Other authors discuss various types of stopped notes. William Rogan divides stopped notes into two categories: "rhetorical" stopped notes, which are used to emphasize a mood, idea, or a word in a vocal text, and "lyrical" stopped notes, which arise out of a composer's desire to imitate the variety of tone color produced by the human voice. Rogan shows examples of each from the works of such composers as Beethoven, Schubert, and Berlioz. See William Rogan, "Stopped Notes on the Horn: Some Aesthetic Considerations," *Historic Brass Society Journal*, 8 (1996): 53-68. For more examples of rhetorical stopped notes used in Czerny's transcriptions of Schubert songs see pp. 23-24 of Andrew Clark, "The Heyday of the Hand Horn and the Birth of the Valved Horn: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Horn Technique as Revealed in the Solo Works for Horn by Carl Czerny," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 13 (2001): 118-127. David Sprung identifies stopped notes in nineteenth-century French operas, including *Carmen* and *Faust*. He suggests that these notes should be played stopped on the modern horn if they satisfy any of the following requirements, which would indicate that the composer purposely wrote a stopped note: they would have been performed fully stopped on the hand horn; they have loud dynamics or are accented; the stopped tone color blends better with the other instruments playing simultaneously; or the stopped tone color produces a dramatic effect that enhances the words or stage action. See David Sprung, "Hidden' Stopped Notes in 19th-Century Opera," *The Horn Call* 26/3 (1996): 17-25.

3. Brahms Trio, Beethoven Horn Sonata, von Krufft Horn Sonata. Lowell Greer, hand horn; Steven Lubin, piano; Stephanie Chase, violin. *Harmonia Mundi* 907037, 1991. For the Brahms, Greer plays a horn made in 1855 by Antoine Courtois in Paris. Mozart Horn Quintet and 24 Duos, Beethoven Sextet and Sonata, Brahms Trio. Andrew Clark and Roger Montgomery, hand horn; Geoffrey Govier, piano; Catherine Martin, violin; Ensemble Galant with Andrea Morris and Jane Rogers, strings. *EMI Classics* 7243 572822 2 2, 1998. For the Brahms, Clark plays a modern copy of a horn made in the mid-nineteenth century by J. Lorenz.

4. Seiffert discusses Brahms's friendship with Cordes on pp. 48-49 of *Johannes Brahms and the French Horn*. See also Seiffert's table "Hornists Who Might Have Influenced Brahms" on p. 64.

5. David Elliott, "The Brahms Horn Trio and Hand Horn Idiom," *The Horn Call* 10/1 (1979): 65. Stephen Stirling describes other aspects of the Trio in all four movements that suggest that it is an elegy for Brahms's mother. In particular, Stirling views the last movement's vigorous hunting horn-like theme as symbolizing Brahms's optimistic recovery from grief. See Stephen Stirling, "The Brahms Trio: A Personal View," *The Horn Magazine* 9/2 (2001): 31-33.

6. Asher Treat, "Brahms Trio, Op. 40," *The Horn Call* 21/2 (1991): 29-30.

7. Elliott, "The Brahms Trio and Hand Horn Idiom," 61.

8. The Trio is often compared to the *Requiem*, which was partly written in memory of Brahms's mother. David Elliott notes that the *Requiem's* second movement is reminiscent of the Trio's third movement. See Elliott, "The Brahms Trio and Hand Horn Idiom," 61. *The Lullaby*, op. 49, no. 4, at first hearing a simple, straightforward work, contains hidden imagery of death. See pp. 198-209 of Karen Böttge, "Brahms's 'Wiegenlied' and the Maternal Voice," *19th-Century Music* 28/3 (2005): 185-213. Further, Christopher Thompson discusses similarities between the beginning of the Trio's first movement and the beginning of the *Gesang aus Fingal*, op. 17, no. 4, for women's chorus, two horns, and harp, whose text starts with the image of a weeping maiden. Thompson also notes characteristics of the Trio's first movement that would have been understood as feminine by musicians of Brahms's day, underscoring the relationship to Brahms's mother's death. See pp. 87-93 of Christopher Thompson, "Re-Forming Brahms: Sonata Form and the Horn Trio, Op. 40," *Indiana Theory Review* 18/1 (1997): 65-96.

9. David Moseley, "Brahms and Dort in den Weiden," *The Horn Call* 22/2 (1992): 21-24.

10. For more information on the harmonic series, see Sprung, "Hidden' Stopped Notes in 19th-Century Opera," footnote 2 on p. 23.

11. This example is an adaptation of p. 99 of Reginald Morley-Pegge, *The French Horn*, 2nd ed., London: Benn, 1973. Morley-Pegge provides a table that compares instructions for playing stopped and open notes from eight nineteenth- and early twentieth-century horn method books. The instructions include half- and three quarter-stopped hand positions in addition to fully stopped. In my discussion of tone color I will ignore the subtle distinctions between various types of stopped notes, and will consider them all to be in the stopped category contrasting with open notes. For the few notes about which the method books disagree, I will accept the opinion of the majority.

12. Cited on p. 65 of Elliott, "The Brahms Horn Trio and Hand Horn Idiom."

13. Elliott also notes the same features of this passage. *Ibid.*, p. 67. Seiffert observes that stopped notes in the Trio often coincide with soft dynamics, but does not provide specific examples. See Seiffert, *Johannes Brahms and the French Horn*, pp. 102-3.

14. Elliott also mentions this passage. See Elliott, "The Brahms Horn Trio and Hand Horn Idiom," p. 67.

15. The fourth movement is in sonata form, and the passage from measures 137-160 appears at the end of the development section. It provides a dramatic and exciting transition to the recapitulation, which starts in measure 161.

16. This category corresponds to Rogan's "rhetorical" usage of stopped notes, described above. See Rogan, "Stopped Notes on the Horn: Some Aesthetic Considerations," pp. 57-63.

17. A similar passage appears in measures 59-67. It contains fewer stopped notes for the horn.

18. The harmonies here are V7 and bVI in E' major, similar to a deceptive cadence.

19. Mark Thompson also notices this feature of the melody, and relates it to other aspects of the first movement. See Mark Thompson, "Brahms and the Light," *The Horn Call* 9/1 (1978): pp. 7-12.

20. Joshua Garrett views the melodic material in the Trio as embodying a conflict between two opposing forces: half steps, in which one note is stopped, and open intervals from the harmonic series. This interpretation is somewhat broader than mine. Garrett traces these two types of motives, and their relationship, through all movements of the Trio. See Joshua Garrett, *Brahms' Horn Trio: Background and Analysis for Performers*, D.M.A. dissertation, Juilliard, 1998. Also available online at www.osmun.com/reference/brahms/Title_Page.html.

21. Garrett claims that the *Scherzo* section of this movement exhibits aspects of sonata form. See his discussion of the second movement in his Chapter 5.

22. David Sprung, "Hidden' Stopped Notes in 19th-Century Opera," pp. 17-25.

23. I also recommend two guides to performing the Trio: Joshua Garrett, *Brahms' Horn Trio: Background and Analysis for Performers*, and Edward Pease, "Performing the Brahms Horn Trio," *The Horn Call* 4/1 (1973): 44-51. Garrett provides a comprehensive discussion of forms, keys, motives, and rhythmic features, some discussion of the hand horn, and many helpful performance suggestions. Pease's discussion of the same features is more concise, but he supplies instructions for the violin and piano as well, including suggestions on effective interaction of the three instruments.

24. Robert Winter examines striking points, the location at which the hammer strikes the string, in nineteenth-century pianos. He concludes that these instruments had a greater variety of tone color from register to register, and from one instrument maker to another, than do modern pianos. See Robert Winter, "Striking it Rich: The Significance of Striking Points in the Evolution of the Romantic Piano," *The Journal of Musicology* 6/3 (1988): 267-292. The piano restorer Michael Frederick notes that the tone color of nineteenth-century Viennese pianos changes with changes in dynamics much more than that of modern instruments. See p. 3 of Ira Braus, "Early Pianos: A Conversation with Michael Frederick," *Early Keyboard Studies Newsletter* 7/3 (1993): pp. 1-5.

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