RHYTHMIC DISSONANCE IN BRAHMS’ HORN TRIO, OP. 40

Christina M. Van Wagenen, (Roger L. Miller)
School of Music

The music of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), progressive and ingenious composer of the 19th century, has provided pleasure and intrigue for performers, listeners and researchers alike. Brahms’ trademarks include rich harmonies and masterful uses of the larger forms, but perhaps his most distinctive device is “rhythmic dissonance”, particularly through the use of hemiola. Hemiola, according to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, is “the articulation of two units of triple metre [sic] as if they were notated as three units of duple metre” (Rushton 2001, 361). The use of hemiola became popular in the Baroque period, an era that Johannes Brahms had researched well in his early years. Brahms composed his “Horn” Trio (Op. 40) in 1865, during a period when his style developed from an amalgamation of influences (Schubert, Beethoven and Schumann, specifically) into a more mature style of increased originality. Brahms’ use of hemiola in the Horn Trio demonstrates not only the influence of J.S. Bach, but also that of the Viennese Waltz, which he so greatly admired during his visits to, as he himself called it, “the musicians’ holy city” (which eventually became his home). But for what effect does the composer use this rhythmic device? By learning and performing the Horn Trio and by researching previous literature on the subject, I have come to the conclusion that Brahms uses hemiola not only to show appreciation for the aforementioned influences, but to create the effect of rhythmic diversity in triple meters. While it may seem that this device would damage the rhythmic unity of Brahms’ works, he employs it so naturally that it does not distract the listener from the pulse.