

# Firm Footing in the Heavens and Faltering Steps on Earth:

Harmonic Language and Structure as Word Painting  
in Johannes Brahms's *Gesang der Parzen*<sup>1</sup>

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**T**he text for Brahms's *Gesang der Parzen* (Song of the Fates), op. 89, which centers on the concept of fate as it relates to mankind, admonishes man to "Fear the Gods! They hold the power in their eternal hands and can use it as they please."<sup>2</sup> Goethe's verses present Iphigenie's recitation of a song her nurse sang to her as a child—a song that returns to Iphigenie during the climactic moments of the drama. She is torn between her gratitude to the gods and her own mortal desires and familial allegiances: she owes a great debt to the gods for saving her from sacrifice at the hands of her father, Agamemnon, but the gods are also responsible for her current servitude and isolation. Her brother, Orestes, has arrived and, contrary to her prophetic dream, is still very much alive—though, as a trespasser in the land of the Taurians, Orestes and his companion are to be sacrificed by Iphigenie, who is understandably

torn and who ruminates on the admonishments of her nurse's song. The final stanza seems as if it is Iphigenie's own voice, lamenting her current state as a mortal within the long and unresolved story of gods and mortals.

Brahms's setting of the text underscores the disparity between the capriciousness and power of the Fates as opposed to the uncertainty of mortal life. Harmonic forces that destabilize the musical surface and the underlying form as an expression of the text are at work at both foreground and background levels. Some of the localized harmonic features include gestures that stray into extended tonal technique and contrapuntally generated non-functional verticalities. Some large-scale harmonic aspects are also of interest to this study: the overall form of the piece fits loosely into a three-part rondo form (see table 1), and—though this formalization does not tell the whole story—the deformation

<sup>1</sup> The current article is a refinement of work presented at the 2006 *University of Georgia Music Research Symposium* and at the 2007 National ACDA conference *Current Research in Choral Music* session.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, act 4, scene 5, lines 38–43, trans. Ron Jeffers and Gordon Paine, *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire*, vol. 2, *German Texts* (Corvallis, OR: Earthsongs, 2000), 105.

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<i>Original text</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>English translation</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>measures</i>	<i>“Rondo” section</i>	<i>Key area(s)</i>
Es fürchte die Götter Das Menschengeschlecht! Sie halten die Herrschaft In ewigen Händen, Und können sie brauchen, Wie’s ihnen gefällt.	The human race should fear the gods. They hold the power in their eternal hands, and can use it as they please.	1–35	I	d
Der fürchte sie doppelt Den je sie erheben! Auf Klippen und Wolken Sind Stühle bereitet Um goldene Tische.	Any whom they exalt should fear them doubly! On cliffs and clouds thrones stand ready around golden tables.	36–47	II	F/f
Erhebet ein Zwist sich: So stürzen die Gäste Geschmäht und geschändet In nächtliche Tiefen, Und harren vergebens, Im Finstern gebunden, Gerechten Gerichtes.	If dissension arises, then the guests are hurled down, despised and disgraced, into the nocturnal depths, and they wait there in vain, bound in darkness, for just judgement.	48–71		
Sie aber, sie bleiben In ewigen Festen An goldenen Tischen.	The gods, however, continue the eternal feasts at the golden tables.	72–79		
Sie schreiten vom Berge Zu Bergen hinüber: Aus Schlünden der Tiefe Dampft ihnen der Atem Erstickter Titanen, Gleich Opfergerüchen, Ein leichtes Gewölke.	They stride over mountains from peak to peak: from the abysses of the deep the breath of suffocated Titans steams up to them like scents of sacrifices, a light cloud.	80–99		
[ <i>Es fürchte die Götter Das Menschengeschlecht! Sie halten die Herrschaft In ewigen Händen, Und können sie brauchen Wie’s ihnen gefällt.</i> ]	[ <i>The human race should fear the gods. They hold the power in their eternal hands, and can use it as they please.</i> ]	100–115	I	d
Es wenden die Herrscher Ihr segnendes Auge Von ganzen Geschlechtern, Und meiden, im Enkel Die eh’mals geliebten Still redenden Züge Des Ahnherrn zu sehn.	The immortal rulers avert their blessing-bestowing eyes from entire races, and avoid seeing, in the grandchild, the once-loved, silently speaking features of the ancestor.	116–161	III	D
So sangen die Parzen; Es horcht der Verbannte, In nächtlichen Höhlen Der Alte die Lieder, Denkt Kinder und Enkel Und schüttelt das Haupt.	Thus sang the Fates. The old, banished one listens to the songs in his nocturnal caverns, thinks of his children and grandchildren, and shakes his head.	162–176	I	d

Table 1. Text, translation, and structural outline for *Gesang der Parzen*<sup>a</sup> Goethe, act 4, scene 5, lines 38–78.<sup>b</sup> Jeffers and Paine, 105–6. Used by permission.

Figure 1 consists of two musical diagrams, a.) and b.), illustrating harmonic transformations in Brahms's *Gesang der Parzen*, mm. 40–47. Diagram a.) shows a simplified voice line with chord symbols: I, IV, R, L, R+P, V<sup>7</sup>, vi, V<sup>7</sup>/V, V. Diagram b.) shows a detail of the final transformation from E<sup>b</sup> major to C dominant seventh chord, with R and P transformations indicated.

Figure 1. Brahms: *Gesang der Parzen*, mm. 40–47; R+P transformation

of this apparent rondo is yet another way in which Brahms expresses aspects of the text.<sup>3</sup>

### Localized Harmonic Features

The music that describes the Fates as they sit at their golden tables among the clouds (mm. 40–47 and again in a variation at mm. 72–79) displays some superficial word painting with its broad harmonic rhythm, block chordal progressions, and leaping, majestic dotted figures in the strings and low winds, but also through its harmonic language.

The voice leading in the passage (shown in simplified form in Figure 1a) shows signs of breaking away from conventional relationships as an expression of the freedom and power enjoyed by the Fates. The motion from the F major triad through the triads B<sup>b</sup> major, G minor, and E<sup>b</sup> major to a C dominant seventh chord is not easily and convincingly described using conventional harmonic relationships. However, using Riemannian means, we can more clearly discuss the voice leading. The motion from the F major chord to the B<sup>b</sup> major chord is best described as a conventional tonic-subdominant motion, but the subsequent motions are best described by R, L, and then R+P transforma-

tions that prolong the subdominant.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1b shows a detail of the final transformation of E<sup>b</sup> major into C dominant seventh chord, which requires two transformations and adds (or perhaps retains from the E<sup>b</sup> major triad) the pitch B<sup>b</sup>. The reason for the contraction of R and P to R + P (instead of R followed by P) may be due to the phrase length, which neatly fits into 4+4 measure groupings with an overall harmonic motion from tonic to dominant over the first four bars, and a subsequent prolongation of the dominant over the next four bars.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the music of the Fates, the music of mankind sits on unsteady ground. Despite the unmistakable D minor tonality of the opening passage (mm. 1–32), the prolonged

<sup>3</sup> The German word *Tonmalerei* is sometimes used to denote large-scale word painting such as this; however, the term is not clearly defined and its use does not add anything to the present discussion.

<sup>4</sup> German theorist Hugo Riemann (1849–1919) developed a system of analysis to describe harmonic motion resulting from parsimonious voice leading between chords. R transformations describe motion between relative major and minor; P transformations describe motion between parallel major and minor; and L transformations occur when there is a leading-tone exchange, i.e., C major to E minor and vice versa. For detailed descriptions of the R, L, and P transformations, see Richard L. Cohn, “As Wonderful as Star Clusters: Instruments for Gazing at Tonality in Schubert,” *19th Century Music* 22, no. 3 (1999): 213–32; and D. Kopp, *Chromatic Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> One might expect that the Fates would be able to transcend four-bar phrases, but perhaps the text and majestic sense of the section were limiting factors.



not. When understood as contrapuntally generated, the harmonic ambiguities become marginally clearer.

Looking closely at the progression from m. 84 to m. 85, it is possible to interpret the G# dominant seventh chord followed by the B# minor chord as a misspelled augmented sixth relationship, but the motion back to the G# dominant seventh chord, as well as the inversion of the B# minor chord,<sup>8</sup> point to a non-functional relationship. The fusion of pitches G# and F# to F# and subsequent splitting back are also non-functional gestures.<sup>9</sup>

Though the next motion from G# dominant seventh to C# dominant seventh could be described as a dominant-tonic relationship with the second chord reinterpreted as a dominant of its subdominant, the two chords are clearly not functioning in this way. As we move away from the C# dominant seventh chord to the next harmony, it quickly becomes clear that the imitative counterpoint brings us to the corresponding fusing gesture from two bars prior. However, the transition from m. 85 to m. 86 remains unclear until we explore further.

Using the notation proposed in Childs (1998), the motion can elegantly be described as  $(S_{2(3)} \bullet S_{3(4)})$  as shown in Figure 3.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>8</sup> That is, a first inversion chord rather than second inversion, which would be heard as the logical cadential progression to the dominant in the key of B# minor.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of fusing and splitting, see Clifton Callender, "Voice-leading Parsimony in the Music of Alexander Scriabin," *Journal of Music Theory* 42, no. 2 (1998): 219–33.

<sup>10</sup> This notation can briefly be explained as follows: 'S' denotes similar motion by half-step in two voices so as to move between dominant seventh chords and half-diminished seventh chords while the other two voices stay fixed; subscript '2(3)' signifies that interval-class 2 stays fixed, while interval class 3 moves by half-step. The dot operator ( $\bullet$ ) indicates that two transformations are to be carried out in sequence. For a complete discussion of a neo-Riemannian

this analysis clarifies the relationship of this harmonic motion to the music that follows (see discussion below).

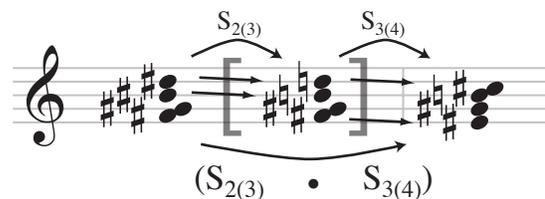


Figure 3. Brahms: *Gesang der Parzen*, mm. 85–86, voice-leading reduction

Figure 4 shows the transformation at work in context: The first two bars consist of the fusion and splitting cited above, and the  $(S_{2(3)} \bullet S_{3(4)})$  is followed by another fusion. The contrapuntal imitation then breaks, and a conventional Riemannian L+P transformation describes the final harmonic move in the example.

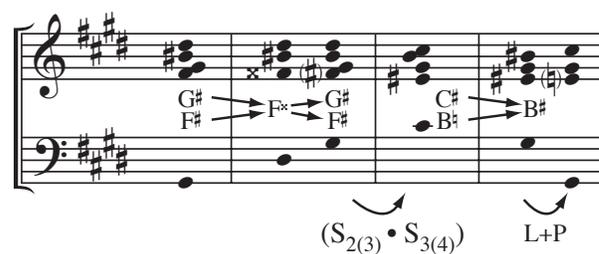


Figure 4. Brahms: *Gesang der Parzen*, mm. 84–87, voice-leading reduction

Just measures later, a more striking example occurs as shown in Figure 5. The first two harmonic shifts are the transformations  $S_{3(4)}$  and  $S_{2(3)}$ , which recall the  $(S_{2(3)} \bullet S_{3(4)})$  transformation from Figures 3 and 4. The salient feature that follows is the  $T_{(1)}$  transformation that links the downbeat of m. 94 with the third beat of m. 95. Brahms softens this wholesale semitonal shift by holding the C# and omitting the A# (shown here fictively and represented as an transformational model and subsequent nomenclature for seventh chords, see Adrian Childs, "Moving Beyond Neo-Riemannian Triads: Exploring a Transformational Model for Seventh Chords," *Journal of Music Theory* 42, no. 2 (1998): 181–93.



mm.	1-35	36-47	48-71	72-79	80-99	100-15	116-161	162-176
Verses:	1	2	3	4	5	1	6	7
Rondo 'Section':	I		II			I	III	I
'Key':	d		F/f			d	D	d

d: V [bVI] III [F: V bVI] [Db: V bVI] V I

Figure 7. Brahms: *Gesang der Parzen*, middle-background sketch

and tonic harmonies, is an augmented triad (B $\flat$ -D-F $\sharp$ ) that settles to a second inversion tonic harmony before finally (briefly) settling to a root position tonic harmony.

The closing passage (mm. 162–176) is not so much an expression of a key area as an expression of this augmented chord. The voices answer one another with figures that arpeggiate the same B $\flat$ -D-F $\sharp$  augmented triad, this time beginning on D and moving up by major thirds. The use of the transposition operation at the major third (with elaboration and support in the orchestra) serves to highlight the D-ness of the passage (by virtue of its position as both primary and final pitch levels) while at the same time serves to undercut its harmonic footing.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the transposition operation, see Howard Cinnamon, "Tonic Arpeggiation and Successive Equal Third Relations as Elements of Tonal Evolution in the Music of Franz Liszt," *Music Theory Spectrum* 8 (1986): 1-24.

Following common romantic topoi, one might expect that the final return of formal section I in a minor mode three-part rondo might take place in the parallel major. If one takes the assumed final major tonic triad (D-F $\sharp$ -A) and moves the A up by a half-step, one is left with the D-F $\sharp$ -B $\flat$  augmented triad that is prolonged in the final passage.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the penultimate chord is not a dominant A major harmony, but rather a neighboring diminished supertonic triad over a tonic pedal. The clearly voiced B $\flat$  highlights the minor-sixth D-B $\flat$  that is a significant element of the D-F $\sharp$ -B $\flat$  augmented triad that permeates the closing passage, while also recalling the motions to bVI occurring throughout the piece, as well as reinforcing the linear relationship between A and B $\flat$  (see Figure 7).

<sup>13</sup> The linear relationship of the pitches A and B $\flat$  is extremely important to the voice leading in the piece and is a topic worthy of address in a more counterpoint-oriented study.

## Conclusions

*Gesang der Parzen* was written in 1882 and can be grouped along with two similar works by Brahms: *Schicksalslied* (1871) and *Nänie* (1881). Though the earlier pieces share general subject matter and are of comparable proportion, they do not share harmonic features like those noted in this study.

Performers approaching *Gesang der Parzen* will do well to note the complex and multidimensional relationship between text and harmony that augments the conventional word painting. Passages with extended tonal techniques will also require an advanced understanding of the ways in which Brahms's voice leading brings singers and instrumentalists to unexpected destinations: Conventional harmonic analysis and voice-leading considerations will not prove adequate.

*Gesang der Parzen* displays harmonic language as word painting in a variety of ways and at several levels. To depict the fickle and capricious nature of the Fates and the uncertain destiny of mankind, Brahms uses not only conventional word painting, but also deeper harmonic methods. Much of the word painting is effected by extended tonal techniques and a fundamental harmonic instability. Some of these features serve to deform the seemingly straightforward three-part rondo form and, in so doing, bolster the sense of uncertainty. The closing augmented-triad gesture, while satisfying at a background level with respect to the underlying structure, is at the same time disquieting and open-ended, and the victory of the ambiguous augmented triad over the tonic triad is signified by the final open fifth.

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