Methods of Communication through Brahms’ Symphony No. 4

Snyder discusses methods of communication which can be seen in Brahms’ Symphony No. 4. The fourth symphony came after the successful first three symphonies and was the pinnacle of Brahms’ symphonic career up to that point. In this symphony, the composer uses methods of communication, specifically imitation, representation, reference to other works, and musical metaphor. By utilizing these vehicles of communication, Brahms writes a work with extra-musical meanings though many consider the piece to be absolute music. Thus, from the examination of this piece, we can infer that it is possible for a piece of music to convey specific messages similar to a text.

Johannes Brahms’ four symphonies were among his last creative works. He spent much of his life writing in other genres. Once he wrote the first three symphonies, the fourth came quickly and easily to him. Symphony No. 4, composed in just over a year, has minute details and intricacies which provide insight into Brahms’ mastery of the symphonic style. Since the premiere in 1885, audiences have loved this symphony and orchestras have continued to play it throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Although the piece is viewed by current critics as the final work of the Romantic period, many listeners still enjoy the piece today. Current scholars also consider Brahms to be the pivotal figure between previous composers in the Classic Era and the artists which would follow in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. The form and instrumentation of the music, along with the musical messages which were portrayed within the work, may be the reasons it continues to be popular.

An audience can find messages conveyed in varied ways by looking into Brahms’ Fourth Symphony. The messages are communicated through the use of imitation, representation, outside quotation, and metaphor. An analysis of the genesis, development, and reception of Brahms’ Fourth Symphony, a symphony which many would consider a piece of absolute music, can be used to show how messages can be conveyed from a composer to the audience.

Much had happened in Brahms’ life before he wrote Symphony No. 4. When Brahms was still a young composer, Robert Schumann claimed that Brahms was to be the successor to Ludwig van Beethoven in the symphonic style. This statement troubled Brahms for many years while he worked in other genres before completing his first symphony. His first creations in the symphonic style were serenades which were successful, but not a work that could truly follow Beethoven’s works. The creative process for Brahms’ First Symphony, from conception to premiere, took twenty-one years. Brahms was aiming for perfection because he was following

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2 In this sense, absolute music is a work which does not contain extra-musical meaning. Many critics and thinkers would consider this symphony absolute because it had neither a program nor a narrative. Although it did not have a program or narrative, it still had messages conveyed – making it not absolute music.
3 Robert Schumann was an important composer during the Romantic Era. He was already well known and a well-acclaimed pianist / composer when he made this claim.
4 This troubled Brahms because Beethoven had been the epitome of symphonic writing for over seven decades. To be the successor to such a tradition would have been cause for tremendous stress and pressure.
6 Serenade – An instrumental work developed in the eighteenth century scored for a small ensemble, often only with wind instruments.
7 Ibid., 55.
the lineage of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. After all those years of strife and revisions, the result was well liked by audiences. The First Symphony cemented Brahms’ reputation as a truly genius composer. Alfred Dorfell wrote, “Its effect on the audience was the most intense that has been produced by any new symphony within our remembrance…. His as great in attack as his two predecessors [Beethoven and Schumann] and has the same wide vision over the domain of spiritual-human existence.” Following the success of the First Symphony, he quickly wrote the Second Symphony in the same style.

Six years passed between the completion of the Second Symphony and the start of the Third Symphony. During this time, Brahms wrote in other genres, such as chamber music and vocal songs, but did not return to symphonic writing for several years. After this hiatus, the Third Symphony debuted with success. The Third Symphony helped Brahms to evolve his compositional style toward what would become his crowning achievement – the Fourth Symphony. Symphony No. 4 was composed during the summers of 1884 and 1885, the two summers after the premiere of the Third Symphony.

The original reception of the work at the premiere by the Meiningen Orchestra in October 1885 was overwhelmingly positive. Although Brahms did not use new or innovative compositional techniques, this symphony was considered to be the pinnacle of Brahms’ career thus far. Brahms’ mastery of the technicalities in the symphonic style could explain the success that the piece has received. The first movement establishes a theme which is heard throughout the rest of the symphony. This theme is played by the first violins with a slurred thirds motif.

![Opening theme from movement 1](image1.png)

Figure 1: Opening theme from movement 1

With this theme, the symphony is set up as a lyric expansion of leaps and melodic material. Alongside this theme there is a contrary theme – a triumphant march. This juxtaposition is important because it suggests chaos and disruption for the listener.

The second movement stays at a relatively slow tempo, which invites more inward and reflective thought. A single-measure theme reoccurs within this movement.

![Repeated theme from movement 2](image2.png)

Figure 2: Repeated theme from movement 2

As the two themes from the first movement are again used in the second movement, the work continues on its journey toward conclusion.

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8 Frisch, Brahms, the Four Symphonies, 31.
9 Musgrave, A Brahms Reader, 227.
11 Frisch, Brahms, the Four Symphonies, 116.
12 Ibid., 115.
13 All information in this paragraph about specific motifs is from Frisch 118 – 140.
Movement three brings about a more jovial element which was not present in the previous two movements. It is at a faster tempo, utilizes more articulation, and has a lighter sound. Movement three is similar to the comic relief in a theatrical work; this movement allows the audience to break from the intense and dense writing of the first two movements. The third movement was the first time that Brahms did not write in the traditional ternary form of symphonic third movements. Instead, he utilized a scherzo. This breaking of the mold caused listeners to pay even more attention to the themes and melodic material used within the symphony.

The final movement, a chaconne, could almost succeed as a separate piece because of the thorough development of the eight note theme:

![Figure 3: Chaconne theme in movement 3](image)

This movement is more complex than a chaconne by Bach, usually a composition for solo keyboard or violin, because it is scored for a full orchestra. As seen in this short summary, one possible reason for the positive reception of Symphony No. 4 stems from Brahms deliberate use of tempo, motif, and form.

Another possible explanation for the symphony’s continued success can be shown by the analysis of the orchestration. The writing for strings is crucial to the symphony as a whole. The string parts are supported by an extensive use of the entire wind section including two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, and timpani. Because of the interplay between the winds and strings, the development of the themes can come across stronger than when themes would simply be left in one section. With an interweaving of parts, the timbre of instruments plays an even more important role. Brahms’ heavy use of winds, strings, and timpani heard in the symphony makes the most of every color available. Because of the symphony’s great success, the work played a part in one of the largest dilemmas in music of the nineteenth-century.

A large debate occurred in the nineteenth century between two factions, each one comprised of musicians, composers, and critics. Some, such as Liszt and Wagner, thought that absolute music, musical works with no extra-musical references or textual narratives, ended with the composition of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. For this group of artists, the only music that could then be created needed a narrative, a program, or other text to make the piece worth-while, thus programmatic music. The other group of musicians, including Brahms and Chopin, thought in the opposite manner. These musicians believed that music for music’s sake was the true art. Brahms wrote all four of his symphonies in this aesthetic perspective, which seems contradictory to the thesis earlier presented in this paper – Brahms composed using ways to convey specific messages in his symphony. In the middle and late nineteenth century, there was little chance that a composer could write in a completely absolute manner. All audiences came into a concert expecting some level of programmatic writing. Even if no programmatic writing was involved in

14 Scherzo – A movement with a rough, almost savage humor, with marked rhythm, generally in ¾ time.
15 Chaconne – A work with a repeated harmonic structure with gestures and phrases built around the harmonies.
18 Frisch, *Brahms, the Four Symphonies*, 161.
the work, many critics felt like great music required a story. Many works of the time, including Brahms’ symphonies, can be viewed as possessing extra-musical messages because of the time period in which the work was composed.

Philosophers, such as Goodman and Bowman, have written how music conveys messages from the composer to the audience. The first and easiest device for communicating messages is the use of direct sound replication or imitation. By directly copying sounds from nature and the world surrounding us, music can evoke many different situations which become reality through sound. Music critics would argue that this does not bring meaning to the work but only replicates sounds present in the world. This is not true because inserting natural sounds into music lends meaning to the work by organizing sounds into a way which makes them comprehensible to the listener. If these same sounds are heard outside of the performance, they carry only the weight of what the world assigns them outside of musical compositions. Meaning is given both to the sound being replicated and to the replication in the music by framing the sound within the context of music. By this replication, extra-musical thoughts are brought to and could be comprehended by the audience.

A second device that a composer can use is the representation of a concrete object or situation as sound. The composer can evoke ideas which rely on cultural understandings of sound. How can a concept or object, which possesses no sound of its own, be represented in a musical composition? This phenomenon occurs with the use of ideas represented in the music as cultural constructs. Through a cultural construct, a rolling meadow or open pasture can be heard in a serene musical setting with a folk like melody. Although there is nothing intrinsically inherent in a musical composition to make it like a pasture, these sounds have been associated with fields for centuries. Representation can also come out of similarity, such as the human voice and an oboe. When an oboe plays a singing melody to “duplicate” the human voice, the audience will relate that sound to a person singing. The oboist is producing the most beautiful sound possible by playing a lush melody, however, the oboist is not trying to be the human voice – but instead to represent it. Thus, the composer does not imitate direct sounds within the work, but instead represents other realities in musical form.

A third way of conveying meaning in music is by utilizing musical ideas from other composers. This sends messages to the audience by relating the current work to the works of past composers. Opponents of this method claim that it does not bring about any ideas that make the new work more meaningful, and yet when the listener hears these previous gestures and compositional techniques, the ideas from previous musical experiences could be recalled (assuming that the listener is well-versed in previous musical compositions). The composer utilizes the successes of others in telling messages or relating it to the current situation by using previous compositions. Musical themes become even further established in the cultural tradition by this “recycling” process.

The fourth way to communicate messages to the audience is the use of musical metaphors. Much like a linguistic metaphor, musical metaphors make connections between two

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19 Ibid., 155.
21 Ibid., 233.
unrelated ideas. The desired result comes from the overlap of the two ideas. The two ideas may be in unrelated categories, yet through the overlap of meaning, the audience can perceive the metaphor which the composer intended. Some of these metaphors are culturally established, such as the interval of a rising perfect fourth is associated with fanfares, alarms, and calls to action, whereas other metaphors are established within context of the piece. Although vague and often tenuous, musical metaphors infuse large ideas into the musical fabric expressed to the listener in a way which not only pierces the intellect but also the inner ear of the subconscious.

Brahms used musical metaphors in his Fourth Symphony. Imitation and representation were not among his most used methods because he believed he was writing in the absolute style, according to the conventions of his time. Thus, Brahms wrote music without a program or narrative, as previously stated in this paper. Composers of absolute music did not use imitation and representation because that implied that a narrative or other art was influencing the work. Despite Brahms’ renouncement of programmatic music, some critics applied a narrative to the work, such as one writer who heard the final movement as the story of a soldier’s funeral. This use of the super-imposed narrative shows how critics of the time would take absolute music and turn it into programmatic music.

Brahms’ most frequently used method of communication in his works is the reference to other composers. Brahms uses ideas from works by three different composers in this piece. Before beginning to write the fourth symphony, Brahms received scores of several of Dietrich Buxtehude’s organ compositions and Johann Sebastian Bach’s cantatas. Buxtehude’s influence is most obvious in the fourth movement of this symphony, which is a chaconne. The chaconne is over an eight-note harmonic progression; Brahms might have learned techniques of how to write over a repeated harmony by studying Buxtehude’s music. Brahms’ chaconne and Buxtehude’s E-minor Ciacona have similar characteristics including the key (E minor), the use of contrapuntally defined dissonance, and the chromatic alterations included in the chaconne theme. Chromatic alterations were also used as notes of the theme were altered in the piece to add variety. These musical techniques can be further developed with Brahms’ chaconne theme, which musicologists claim came from Johann Sebastian Bach. Even though Brahms’ reached to ideas from Buxtehude’s writing, it was Bach’s chorale which provided an outline for the theme.

Brahms could have used J. S. Bach’s chorale, Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich, (the chorale at the end of Cantata No. 150), in the repeated bass line of the final movement chaconne. The eight notes of the chaconne bass line in the fourth movement are similar to the melody of the chorale:

Bach, Cantata No. 150

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26 Bowman, Philosophical Perspectives, 230.
27 Frisch, Brahms, the Four Symphonies, 155
28 Geiringer, Brahms, his life and work, 155.
29 Contrapuntally defined dissonance - a clashing of notes that can be explained by the analysis of the multi-voice writing
31 Ibid., 4.
Although the themes by Brahms and Bach are alike, the chromatic alteration, probably an influence from Buxtehude, is what makes the theme by Brahms so memorable. Moreover, it is not entirely accurate to claim that Brahms’ subject came directly from Bach’s cantata. A Baroque chaconne will almost always use a harmonic structure from tonic to dominant. Even though the subjects are similar in pitch class and Brahms received the cantata score briefly before composing *Symphony No. 4*, it cannot be proven that *Cantata No. 150* is exactly where Brahms found this chaconne theme.

Another influence from Bach could be from the text of the chorale at the end of *Cantata No. 150*. The text of that chorale might have been an inspiration to Brahms as he wrote the final movement:

> My days spent in sorrow  
> God ends nevertheless with joy;  
> Christians on the thorny ways  
> are led by heaven's strength and blessing.  
> If God remains my faithful protection,  
> I do not care for men’s spite.  
> Christ, who stands at our side,  
> helps me every day to strive victoriously.

In referring to this text, however subconsciously it could had been, Brahms was telling of the strength given to overcome the daily struggles of life. Brahms’ many influences and forms of communication were important as he tackled the tremendous burden put upon him by Schumann. Being the appointed “successor of Beethoven,” Brahms refers to Beethoven in several thematic elements within the symphony. The thirds used throughout the symphony can be traced back to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Romantic composers were enamored with thirds which became the generating material for melodies and harmonic relationships: for example, in this work, which is in E minor, Brahms sets the third movement in C major, a major third apart the original tonality. The connection between the subject of the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and the first movement of Brahms’ Fourth can be seen in the similar descending thirds shown below:
Brahms, Fourth Symphony, mvt. I

Figure 5: Similar themes from Beethoven and Brahms

The intervals from B to G and A to F-sharp are the minor thirds from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The intervals from E to C and D-sharp to B may look like they do not stem from the same background. They are both sixths: the first being a minor sixth and the second being a major sixth. Inverted, these also become thirds, continuing Brahms’ pattern of thirds and maintaining the connection with Beethoven’s theme.

After having referred to works by three different composers, Brahms turns to metaphors to show important ideas to the audience. Two images may come to the listener throughout the symphony because of the use of metaphors. The first is a metaphor of conflict between the opposing forces present in the world. As the conflicting themes are juxtaposed, the listener may, subconsciously or not, recall the universal struggles of humanity. In that time of social change, during the Industrial Revolution, there was a general feeling of struggle in adjusting to the new ways of society.34 As Brahms takes the different musical thoughts throughout the different tonalities and changes, the listener is offered a mirror of the conflicting forces of the time. Another metaphor draws on the resolution of the conflict. By the end of the final movement, order has triumphed over the confusion. The final cadences allow the listener and the world to be at peace because of the tonal resolution. Brahms shows his messages of triumph over chaos within the confines of the symphony through these metaphors.

Brahms did not do exactly as the public wanted in how he brought musical ideas forward and yet he is among the most important personalities in the musical cannon of composers.35 His choice of orchestration and thematic development is of utmost importance to the study of music history and musical evolution. Despite the fact that European audiences were slowly turning away from this style of music at the time, his music was liked and well received by the public. This positive reception has continued to the present. In a universally liked work, the public – even if not agreeing with every message conveyed or every musical concept utilized – continues to enjoy hearing the piece and become consumers of the product. This universal appreciation of Brahms’ messages of triumph places him among the masters in the symphonic tradition. He ended the common practice period36 with a monumental symphony which is an important part of the western musical cannon.

Many critics and scholars would classify Symphony No. 4 as a work of absolute music because it does not have a narrative, program notes, or movement titles. This symphony does have extra-musical meaning, which should prevent any categorical classification of this work as “absolute” music. As shown in this paper, Brahms utilized different compositional devices for conveying meaning, which renders the work not quite absolute as we understand the term nowadays.

Listeners of music have said, and will continue to say, that music without text cannot convey semantic messages; it can only evoke emotional responses. Yet, through the use of

34 Geiringer, Brahms, his life and work, 150.
35 Ibid., vii.
36 Common Practice Period – From roughly 1720-1890, J S. Bach to Brahms, in which the vast majority of music follows the accepted rules of voice leading and formal writing.
imitation, representation, reference to other works, and metaphor, the audience can hear what a composer intended to transmit. With knowledge of Bach’s cantata, although the theme may not be an exact reference, the text can be used to further understand Brahms’ writing. This symphony is neither completely absolute nor is it programmatic. Thus, in the continuum between programmatic and absolute music, this symphony can be placed somewhere in the middle.

Works such as Bach’s inventions and twentieth-century dodecaphonic music could be placed at the absolute music end of this continuum, while Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique and Liszt’s symphonic poems would be at the other end. This continuum of music shows how works are best not classified as either completely absolute or programmatic, but instead as a blend of the two approaches, depending on the work, composer, and zeitgeist of the time.

Brahms’ Symphony No. 4 spread ideas about triumph over confusion and success through the struggle. By understanding the musical aspects throughout the work, an audience can hear how Brahms manipulates the ideas to relay the messages as he willed them. Today’s listener can hear messages of triumph just as much as these messages were heard 125 years ago.
Bibliography
As in the first symphony, Brahms' orchestration is lean, with limited brass and percussion. This score even lacks the first symphony's contrabassoon. But Brahms make good use of his small orchestra in this work. When Brahms completed the Fourth Symphony, in the Styrian resort town of Mürzzuschlag in the summer of 1885, he referred to it humorously as "a few entr'actes and polkas which I happened to have lying about," but he was quite aware of what he had achieved in this work. Though the symphony now is considered a masterpiece, it actually met some resistance from critics. This book is the definitive guide to Johannes Brahms's four symphonies. It presents an engaging and thorough treatment of the genesis, structure, reception. In this light, Brahms may be said to have displayed symphonic ambitions and skills early on, even though his actual First Symphony was completed only in his forty-fourth year. Brahms's first surviving instrumental compositions, written between 1851 and 1853, are three imposing piano sonatas, opp. 1, 2, and 5, and the E-minor Scherzo, op. 4. It was the Cith this Item. Chapter 3 THE FIRST SYMPHONY, OP. 63. However, after years of anxious revisions, Symphony No. 4 was rapturously received in 1881. Bruckner labelled it the "Romantic," alluding to its depiction of an almost Wagnerian world of medieval castles and hunts in leafy woodland glades; everything that would appeal to his public both then and now. Rattle has been credited with introducing a greater transparency to the Berlin Philharmonic's sound and, in this symphony full of changes in texture and orchestration, that strength is played to the full. From the opening bars and first duplet-plus-triplet subject, there is the feeling of barely c Learn more about Brahms's powerful Symphony No. 4, a work of profound depth. During the summers of 1884 and 1885, Brahms composed his Symphony No. 4, working secretly in a quiet Austrian town in the Alps as was his usual practice. Brahms wrote his Fourth Symphony there 15 years earlier. For all its warmth and beauty, Brahms's Fourth has an undeniably tragic character. Many have speculated as to its source. After the first movement, the critic Eduard Hanslick, a steadfast champion of Brahms's music, confessed that "Throughout the whole movement I felt as if I were being beaten by two terribly clever people."