

# Brahms the Autumnal

Cyclical and Progressive Structures and Meanings in *Im Herbst*,  
Op. 104 #5

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Brahms's late setting of Klaus Groth's poem *Im Herbst* has recently come under special scrutiny by theorists, an attention well deserved and for more than just the extraordinary quality of the music. Early recognition followed the work's 1888 publication: Heinrich Schenker's review of 1892 commended the power of Brahms's interpretation; seven years later this piece was chosen for performance at the poet's funeral. Groth's meditation on autumn-as-end-of-life seems particularly apposite to Brahms's position in the tradition of the tonal language. The poem's central issues of life, death, and transcendence became an opportunity for Brahms to reconsider the fundamental metaphors of the tonal language in which he had become so adept. The purpose of my paper is to reveal Brahms's setting as a complex essay that reassesses the fundamental metaphors of his musical language as it explores the resonance of the poem's underlying imagery.

A first version of *Im Herbst* was performed in 1886; a number of significant revisions were incorporated into the version published two years later. (I will refer to these later.) The piece is cast in a modified strophic form: The first two strophes are set to identical music in C minor (see the provided score); the third strophe is in C major and is very freely varied. In light of my analysis, the adherence of this piece to a standard form of text setting will perhaps seem

ironic.

Before undertaking a close reading of Brahms's score, I will first consider Groth's poem, as interpreted through my own somewhat free translation. (To be sure, the reading of the poem that I will present and that is reflected in my translation is one that I have heard *through* Brahms's setting of it.) The central metaphor of this text is a simple one: autumn is the fading of life and in the cycle of things there must come an ending. The concept of cycle rules the poem: the short spondaic lines that begin every half strophe ring through like the tolling of a bell. The second strophe replaces the seasonal metaphor with an image of night stifling a bleak autumnal day. These first two strophes unfold cycles of Nature, setting apart the third, which rests entirely in the human sphere. The turn toward the human perspective is effected by the transition from the strict assonance/consonance of "Ernst ist der Herbst," through the increasingly dissimilar echoes of it: "Still ist die Flur,...Bleich ist der Tag,...Früh kommt die Nacht...Sanft wird der Mensch...Feucht wird das Aug'." The third stanza also shifts from passive observation to contemplative reaction. The nature of that reaction is ambiguous in Groth's text. I believe Brahms's reading can be inferred through structural analysis.

*(Click on the images to download the full score)*

# Im Herbst

from "Fünf Gesänge" Op. 104, n. 5  
(Text by Klaus Groth)

A pall is upon fall,  
and when leaves lower,  
the heart droops also  
clouded with woe.  
Still is the field,  
and to the south the songbirds  
sojourn, silent,  
as to the grave.

Bleak is the day,  
and a pallid haze veils  
the sun as it does the heart.  
soon the night nears;  
then all force falters  
and the spirit is locked in standstill.

Grace comes to man.  
He sees the sun sink,  
and knows that life,  
like the year, will end.  
Most grow his eyes,  
yet into those gleaming tears pours  
his heart's ecstatic effusion.

Johannes Brahms  
(1833-1897)

**Andante**

Soprano  
Ernst ist der Herbst, und wenn die Blät - ter fal - - len, sinkt auch  
Bleich ist der Tag, und blas - se Ne - belschlei - ern die Son - ne,

Alto  
Ernst ist der Herbst, und wenn die Blät - ter fal - - len, sinkt auch das  
Bleich ist der Tag, und blas - se Ne - belschlei - - ern die Son - - ne, die

Tenor  
Ernst ist der Herbst, und wenn die Blät - ter fal - - len, sinkt auch das  
Bleich ist der Tag, und blas - se Ne - belschlei - - ern die Son - - ne, die

Bass  
Ernst ist der Herbst, und wenn die Blät - ter fal - - len, sinkt auch  
Bleich ist der Tag, und blas - se Ne - belschlei - ern die Son - ne,

6  
das Herz, sinkt auch das Herz zu trü - bem Weh her - ab. Still ist die  
die Son - ne wie die Her - zen, wie die Her - zen ein. Früh kommt die

Herz, sinkt auch das Herz zu trü - bem Weh her - ab. Still ist die  
Son - - - ne wie die Her - zen, wie die Her - zen ein. Früh kommt die

Herz, sinkt auch das Herz zu trü - bem Weh her - ab. Still ist die  
Son - - - ne wie die Her - zen, wie die Her - zen ein. Früh kommt die

das Herz zu trü - - - - bem Weh her - - ab. Still ist die  
die Son - ne wie die Her - - zen ein. Früh kommt die

11

Flur, und nach dem Sü - den wal - - len die Sän - - ger stumm, wie  
Nacht: denn al - le Kräf - te fei - - ern, und tief ver - schlos - - sen

Flur, und nach dem Sü - den wal - - len die Sän - - ger stumm, wie  
Nacht: denn al - le Kräf - te fei - - ern, und tief ver - schlos - - sen

Flur, und nach dem Sü - den wal - - len die Sän - - ger stumm, wie  
Nacht: denn al - le Kräf - te fei - - ern, und tief ver - schlos - - sen

Flur, und nach dem Sü - den wal - - len die Sän - - ger stumm, wie  
Nacht: denn al - le Kräf - te fei - - ern, und tief ver - schlos - - sen

16

nach dem Grab, wie nach dem Grab. Sanft wird der Mensch. Er  
ruht das Sein, ruht das Sein. *dolce*

nach dem Grab, wie nach dem Grab. Sanft wird der Mensch. Er  
ruht das Sein, ruht das Sein. *dolce*

nach dem Grab, wie nach dem Grab. Sanft wird der Mensch. Er  
ruht das Sein, ruht das Sein. *dolce*

nach dem Grab, wie nach dem Grab. Sanft wird der Mensch. Er  
ruht das Sein, ruht das Sein. *dolce*

22

sieht die Son - ne sin - - ken, er ahnt, er ahnt des Le - bens  
*espress. cresc.*

sieht die Son - ne sin - - ken, er ahnt, er ahnt des Le - - - -  
*espress. cresc.*

sieht die Son - ne sin - - ken, er ahnt, er ahnt des Le - - - -  
*espress. cresc.*

sieht die Son - ne sin - - ken, er ahnt, er ahnt des Le - bens

27 *p* *pp*

wie des Jah - - - res Schluss. Feucht wird das Aug', doch

*p* *pp*

- - bens wie des Jah - res Schluss. Feucht wird das Aug', doch

*p* *pp*

- - bens wie des Jah - - - res Schluss. Feucht wird das Aug', doch in der

*p* *pp*

wie des Jah - - - res Schluss. Feucht wird das Aug', doch in der

32 *cresc.* *f*

in der Thrä - ne Blin - - ken, doch in der Thrä - ne Blin - ken ent - strömt des

*cresc.* *f*

in der Thrä - ne Blin - - ken, doch in der Thrä - ne Blin - ken ent - strömt, ent -

*cresc.* *f*

Thrä - - ne Blin - - ken, doch in der Thrä - ne Blin - ken ent - strömt, ent -

*cresc.* *f*

Thrä - - ne Blin - - ken, doch in der Thrä - ne Blin - ken ent - strömt, ent -

37 *p dolce* *dim.* *pp*

Her - - - zens se - lig - ster Er - guss, se - lig - - ster Er - - guss.

*p dolce* *dim.* *pp*

strömt des Her - zens se - lig - ster Er - guss, se - - - lig - ster Er - - guss.

*p dolce* *dim.* *pp*

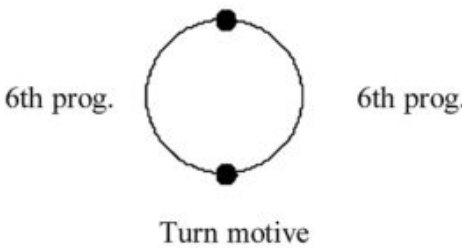
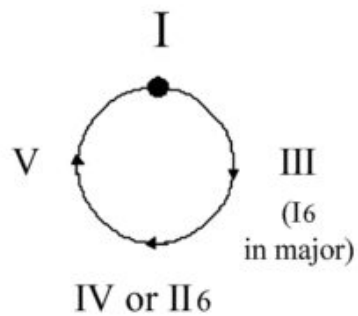
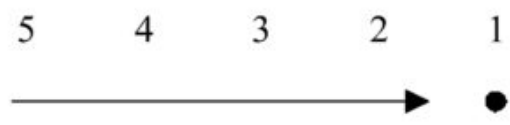
- strömt des Her - zens se - lig - ster Er - guss, se - - - lig - ster Er - guss.

*p dolce* *dim.* *pp*

- strömt des Her - zens se - lig - ster Er - guss, se - lig - - ster Er - - guss.

The basic lineaments of this reading are presented in Figure 1, in which I have outlined three types of process. The first poetic image is characterized as cyclic. Cycles move unceasingly and inevitably through the same points. They possess neither beginning nor end and thus are not goal-directed. (Cycles of two units, such as day or night, are not even ordered with respect to either unit.) A cycle is closed and ultimately unchanging. At the bottom of Figure 1 is its opposite, which I have called progression, a straight-line unidirectional motion toward a single goal. This is embodied in a single life, "Created half to rise and half to fall," to quote Pope, a traversal that ends with closure more complete than is desired. Of course, an individual life is a single iteration of a cycle larger than itself. This aspect is captured by my middle process, the spiral, which restricts goal-directed motion within a continual cycle. Here, as in annual cycles, growth is balanced by decay. All must eventually cycle back to the same point that is both departure and return.

Figure 1: Structural Analogies in *Im Herbst*

Poetic Meaning	Musical Structure
<p>Cycle: Cycles of nature; the seasons, day and night</p>	<p>Cycle: Motivic palindrome</p> <p>Turn motive</p>  <p>6th prog. 6th prog.</p> <p>Turn motive</p>
<p>Spiral: Growth or decay within cyclic return</p>	<p>Spiral: Harmonic progression</p>  <p>I</p> <p>V III (I6 in major)</p> <p>IV or II6</p>
<p>Progression: Growth or decay towards goal without cyclic repetition</p>	<p>Progression: The <i>Uralinie</i> and lower-level linear progressions</p>  <p>5 4 3 2 1</p>

The spiral, then, is where the central metaphor of the poem resides. Put in these terms, the realization of the third strophe sees the openness of progression constrained by the closure of cycle. There is no possible denial of these forces; there can be only acceptance and the possibility of transcendence.

I will now turn to the structural analogies Brahms creates through his musical setting. As you can see from Figure 1 the first of these equates the cyclic with a motivic palindrome. To illustrate this I will turn to Example 1. The music of the first two strophes is analyzed on the upper system, which segments this music into an antecedent and a consequent phrase. Each of these phrases is prefaced with a two-bar fragment, setting the short spondaic lines, that I have labeled a motto, after Kalbeck. The motto is associated with a turn figure; the first statement represents its basic pitch level, circling around G with A-flat and F-sharp. (This will often be verticalized into an augmented-sixth sonority.) I have symbolized the melodic figure with the graphic sign for the ornament of a turn. Note that the turn figure recurs, independent of the motto, at the end of both phrases, anchoring them like pillars. In between the upper voice fills in linear progressions of a sixth; these take on motivic significance as hidden repetitions. Thus each phrase shows a motivic palindrome: turn figure, sixth progression; sixth, turn figure. (The pattern is broken only at the work's turning point in the third stanza.)

*(Click on the image to download the full score)*





Figure 1 also shows that the second structural analogy equates the spiral with harmonic progression. This basic element of the tonal language exhibits the spiral's conflation of the cyclic and progressive. Harmonic progression is cyclic in its inevitable return to the tonic chord. It is progressive in that an ordered unidirectional sequence of harmonies moves from one tonic to the next. The common terms harmonic progression and harmonic cycle convey the duality of directed motion within bounded return.

Also shown in Figure 1 is the particular harmonic progression in play in this piece: a motion in minor from I to III, IV or II6, through V returning to I. This progression is present *in nuce*, leading to a half cadence, in bars 3–4 (visible in Example 1 but not labeled). The progression is expanded through the remainder of the antecedent phrase. The complete cycle underlies the structure of the first and second strophes at the largest level and finally, by concluding the third strophe, becomes the structural harmonic underpinning for the whole piece.

This and other harmonic progressions are a centrifugal counterforce to the static anchoring of the turn figure, thus composing out in musical structure the two tendencies enclosed within a spiral. Example 2 hypothesizes possible harmonic progressions that might occur if the deflecting force of the turn figure were removed. Ex. 2a suggests a diatonic continuation based on the contour of the outer voices in the first bar, leading to a cadence on E-flat. Ex. 2b introduces the chromatic sound characteristic of the turn and suggests how it might lead to a half-cadence in A-flat. Ex. 2c gives the actual opening: F-sharp forces a turn to C minor, almost coercively. The highly unusual augmented-sixth sonority on the last quarter of bar 1, together with the non-tonic opening, reinforces the sense that the turn figure has been superimposed on the harmony, which it bends to its demands.

*(Click on the image to download the full score)*

Example 2: Hypothetical harmonic progressions deflected by superimpositions of turn figures, and their actual realizations in *Im Herbst*

a) Diatonic continuation of opening chords

b) Continuation with chromatic sonority

c) Turn figure forces cadence in C minor in actual opening

d) Implication of letter b realized in m. 4-6

e) Implication of letter a continued in m. 10 with reference to harmonies of letter d

f) Turn figure forces closing of strophe in mm. 16-19

g) Turn figure superimposed on C major bass arpeggio in mm. 20-1

h) Augmented sixth forces chromatic progression in mm. 24-5

i) Augmented sixth yields to diatonic harmony in mm. 30-1

j) Augmented sixth overflows goal tone in m. 37

k) Augmented sixth allows G to persist through final cadence in mm. 40-2

Yet harmony resists. Ex. 2d shows that just as the turn is about to materialize, F-sharp becomes G-flat and resolves as implied in 2b. (Note how this harmonic progression is textually connected to a human reaction.) Ex. 2e realizes the implication of 2a and even recovers some of the harmonies left off in 2d. A quick glance back at Example 1 will show that I interpret bar 10 as a tonic chord with added sixth (or a *Leittonwechselklang*). This I chord and the following III chord represent a stubborn reassertion of the basic harmonic progression, literally underneath the superimposed turn figure. It is the latter which closes the strophe (see Ex. 2f) as the harmonic cycle reaches its end.

At this point I will introduce the third of the analogies outlined in Figure 1. Those natural processes that move through growth and decay without cyclic return I have simply

labeled progressions; in the poem these characterize a human life. The musical analogy is not (as we have seen) harmonic progression, but the linear progression in the Schenkerian sense. The highest level of linear progression, the *Urlinie*, embodies progression to the greatest degree: a single motion to a goal not a cyclic return to a beginning. For Schenker, linear progressions at all levels represented music's most powerful vehicles of causality and synthesis.

I have already pointed out the linear progressions of a sixth shown in Example 1. These progressions represent agents of motion that are constrained by the turn figure's cyclic recurrence binding them into a palindrome. However, rising above the turn figures is a higher-level melodic continuity indicated on Example 1 by the beams above the staves. In my reading, the *Kopftön* is not the G of bar 2, but the climactic G in bar 35 an octave higher. What begins in bar 2 is a gradually rising arpeggio that spreads itself across the closural divide of the first two strophes. Example 3 summarizes this (and includes the third strophe). The arpeggiation of Ex. 3b is not immediately successful in overcoming cyclic closure; it is interrupted in Ex. 3c and cadences with a third progression at 3d (before the first double bar—Examples 3e and f fill out the content yet more fully.)

*(Click on the image to download the full score)*

### Example 3: The progression of the structural top voice

a) Background

b) First order arpeggiation

c) Arpeggiation interrupted and begun again

d) Third progression creates formal closure

Strophe 1 & 2      Strophe 3

e) Interruptions divide strophes

f) Sixth progressions and harmonic context

C: I      b III      IV      V  $\frac{4}{3} = \frac{3}{2}$       I

The structure presented in Example 1 for the first two strophes is maintained in its essentials for the third strophe (even to the extent of giving background significance to the flat III harmony in a major-key context). The antecedent phrase, however, is drastically recomposed as an astonishing series of augmented-sixth chords drags the music off course. The crisis is precipitated by the focal issue of the poem: the realization that life's progress will eventually be closed off. The import of this sends a shudder through the tonal structure: harmonic progression is foregone (from bar 24); the rising arpeggio is cut off and reaches an impasse on C-sharp in bar 26. The hollow octaves that follow are truly parallel: Example 4 provides more context for my reading of this recondite passage.

(Click on the image to download the full score)

Example 4: Voice leading sketches of mm. 22–9 in successive stages of elaboration



Example 5: *Der Herbst [sic]*, 1886 version, excerpts (transposed up a minor third from the original)

a) mm. 24–9

b) mm. 35–9

Thus, all that represents straightforward progression is minimized. Brahms's revision of this passage makes it clear that this was his intention. The corresponding passage from the 1886 version is given in Example 5a. Though common elements remain, the very prominent sixth progression labeled with a bracket was removed from the later version. Momentarily, cycle triumphs over progression.

I will now return to Example 2, to continue where I left off. Example 2g again illustrates the superimposition of the cyclic turn on a seemingly incompatible harmony. The augmented sixth that sets off the crisis progression in bar 24 (Ex. 2h) is considerably softened in bar 30 (Ex. 2i) and becomes

positively ecstatic in bar 37 (Ex. 2j). The turn's more usual A-flat-to-G has been transformed into G-sharp-to-A. Example 1 shows that in bar 37 the melody overflows the high G to initiate an enlargement of the turn figure (see the letters below the beam), now supported by a complete harmonic progression. All three structural processes come together at this point.

However, there is a dilemma: cadential closure, so basic to the tonal language, has come in this work to symbolize death. But total closure is avoided: the *Urlinie*'s descent is buried in inner voices and absorbed by the ecstatic ending. Finally it is the turn figure's G that persists in sounding, circumventing complete closure. Again Brahms's revision is significant: Example 5b shows that a linear sixth, a progressive element, stood in place of the turn figure in the earlier version. Transcendence can only be attained by accepting and even embracing the inevitability of the cycle.

In conclusion, Brahms in this work creates musical analogies that are not just contingent illustrations of a textual detail, but are evocations of the fundamental metaphors of tonal processes. The subtle lack of closure of his ending was hardly extreme for the 1880s, but what is radical is the way closure as a tonal norm is simultaneously reasserted *and* questioned. Was this Brahms's way of reaffirming the vitality of his style in his own time? Probably. Reading in personal resonance is less secure, but hard to escape. Brahms the autumnal may have indeed sought transcendence: he seems to have realized it in *Im Herbst*.