

# WJEC AoS E: Brahms

## Symphony No. 1, fourth movement

KS5

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### Introduction

The final movement of Brahms's First Symphony is a 16-minute epic, befitting of a Symphony that took more than 20 years to write. It is chock-full of the kind of structural detail that shows Brahms's musical personality to be highly intellectual as well as thoroughly dramatic.

It may well be a daunting proposition for A level students, even though they will have studied Haydn's 'Drumroll' Symphony in their AS year. Undoubtedly, teachers will likewise look at the level of complexity in the score and ask: 'Where do I start?'

This resource does not intend to replicate the content of any of the excellent resources available on the WJEC website. It includes practical ideas for how to get started with teaching the set work, cementing the requisite knowledge in students' memories, and revision activities. This will involve pre-loading learning about the themes of the movement and its salient harmonic features before diving into the score. The idea is to get students thinking deeply about musical ideas before seeing how these are employed by Brahms in the set work.

### Getting started

WJEC advises use of the Eulenberg edition of the score. It's going to be very important for students to annotate their scores very thoroughly – preferably using highlighters and coloured pens – so you'll need to consider whether each student will have their own copy of a Eulenberg score, or whether they will have copies printed from one of the several very good editions available on IMSLP ([https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_No.1,\\_Op.68\\_\(Brahms,\\_Johannes\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_No.1,_Op.68_(Brahms,_Johannes))). An A4 copy will give more space to write notes, and in addition, any students who prefer doing everything on a laptop or tablet will be able to annotate a PDF. Later on in the learning process, it can also be helpful to use unannotated copies of portions of the score for revision activities, which is another good reason to download a decent copy from IMSLP.

It's also very useful to have a system of colour-coding for the musical elements. You may well use a mnemonic – MAD T SHIRT, DR P SMITH and so on – for the musical elements, and it's worth assigning a colour to each. A huge proportion of exam questions focus on particular elements, so students need a rock-solid framework in their memory for this. Having a set of coloured pens for annotation in designated elements colours can assist greatly with this, and also enable students to pull out all the details of a particular element from the score with ease. It doesn't matter how you assign the colours – students do not even need to have the same system as each other. What matters is establishing that link between an element and a colour.

With a piece as full as thematic development as the fourth movement of Brahms's First Symphony, it's essential to be able to spot key motifs throughout the analysis process. Therefore, it makes sense to start our investigation of the movement by getting to know the themes. Indeed, it can be extremely effective to do some significant exploration of these before students even listen to the full movement or look at the score. This will provide them with markers to look out for when they do get to know the piece, pre-loading their mental schemata with its significant features.

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Johannes Brahms, photographed around 1872

There are two motifs in the opening bars which recur throughout the movement:

1. Violine

2. Violine

Bratsche

Violoncell

Kontrabaß

Adagio

Head motif

Tetrachord

The 'head motif' will assume immense importance later in the movement. A tetrachord is simply a group of four notes. Strictly speaking, the notes in a tetrachord should span the interval of a 4th, as these do. Brahms was very fond of the perfect 4th: it often pervades his works as a melodic device.

Students should play these two motifs on whatever instruments suit them. This, of course, might mean reading from an unfamiliar clef: depending on their level of experience and skill, they could do this at sight or write out the motif in their preferred clef. Either way, it's good practice for musical thinking.

Next, guide students through anticipating how the motifs could be developed. Encourage them to try different techniques:

- ▶ Rhythmic diminution and augmentation.
- ▶ Melodic diminution and augmentation.
- ▶ Repeating in a sequence, ascending and descending.
- ▶ Inversion.
- ▶ Fragmentation: which parts of the head motif would work well as a separate fragment?

Once these ideas have been thoroughly explored, you could try collectively assembling them in a co-created devised piece. It will be interesting later to see which of the ideas from the activity crop up in the Symphony itself.

Ensure that students have a solid grasp of the perfect 4th: they need to be able to recognise it when they see it and hear it. Get them to challenge each other in pairs: they can name a pitch and then their partner can play the pitch that is a perfect 4th higher or lower.

In bars 28-29, we have a three-note chromatic motif that has been previously heard in earlier movements of the Symphony:

1. Viol.

2. Viol.

Br.

Vcl.

K.B.

con sordini

con sordini

con sordini

con sordini

con sordini

3-note chromatic

Piu Andante

Next, we have the ‘alphorn’ theme from bar 30:



This ‘alphorn’ theme has an interesting backstory. Brahms heard this melody being played on alphorns while on holiday in the Alps in 1868, transcribed it, and sent it on a postcard to Clara Schumann with the message ‘Thus blew the shepherd’s horn today!’, writing underneath the manuscript ‘High on the hill, deep in the dale, I send you a thousand greetings!’

Alphorns or alpine horns can only play notes of the harmonic series, as they are essentially natural brass instruments. The F sharp in this theme is the 11th harmonic, which gives a Lydian lift to the melody, as we are expecting to hear F natural at this point.

These two themes can be played and given the same investigative treatment. The ‘alphorn’ theme feels like it has an extra bar: how could it be modified to create a more conventional eight-bar phrase? What are the most distinctive melodic shapes from this theme? Could these be used as a fragment for repetition and development? How could we harmonise this theme? Is there any way in which the three-note chromatic motif could be used to create an accompaniment figure for the alphorn theme?

We then have the ‘trombone chorale’ from bar 47:



This is brief and rather mysterious, disappearing as soon as it has appeared, but biding its time for a triumphant return much later on. There is a good challenge with reading this from the tenor clef, whether students need to write this out in either treble or bass clef, or play directly from the tenor clef notation. The big question with this theme is what key it’s in. The first two chords form a perfect cadence in D minor, but then we get V-I in E flat, and then another cadence in F major, with a twist back to G major to prepare for the return of the ‘alphorn’ theme in C major. How can all these chords be expressed in relation to C major? For example, the opening A major chord is V of vi. Can all the chords be given secondary relationships such as this, or should we interpret this brief passage as tonally shifting, utilising dominant-tonic relationships to thrust us through several different tonal areas?

Finally, we have the first subject from the exposition, often known as the ‘Beethoven theme’ because of its similarity to the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony:



The full 16 bars of this instantly appealing theme are ripe for harmonic exploration by students. How can it be harmonised? Where are the cadence points? What can be done in the third phrase to avoid repeating the same pattern of chords underneath the recurring melodic figure? There is also the million-dollar question of which of the previous motifs this ‘Beethoven theme’ is related to.

## Analysing the score: themes

Only now the constituent themes have been well and truly examined can we approach Brahms's score with a good level of anticipatory understanding. It can be good to tell students what the overall structure of the movement is first, and label the different sections in the score, as trying to unpick it while blind to what the structure actually is would probably be too daunting for A level students.

Once the sections are established, however, you can set them chunks to unpick and analyse by themselves, individually, in pairs or as a group. The task is to spot where each motif occurs and highlight it in the designated colour. Everyone can come back together periodically to compare what they've found. If you have enough students, you could even make it a competition between teams. Watching them argue the case for the presence of a fragmented version of a theme here or there will gladden your music teacher heart, and sharpen their analytical skills much more than passively receiving an analysis lecture. They can also compare Brahms's treatment of the themes to the ideas they came up with themselves.

This part of the whole procedure may take some time. This is absolutely fine: the pre-learning that was put in by doing the practical exploration of the themes will make the learning deep and memorable.

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## Tertiary relationships

Another key feature of this movement, particularly the recapitulation, is tertiary relationships: both chords and keys a 3rd apart. This could be another thing to explore through some practical work before a close look at the harmony and tonality of the movement.

Start by investigating chords that share a common note. This is often (although not always) how tertiary relationships work: the shared note forms the pivot between two chords or even two keys. Ask students to pick a note – let's say C – and find as many chords as possible that have a C in them. There's a chance that they might give C major, A minor, F major, and perhaps Dm7, and then run out of steam. In this case, they will need to have it pointed out that chords with black notes in might also include a C! Once they have as many options as possible, challenge them to come up with some chord sequences that mostly (or exclusively) make use of these connections. You never know, these might end up having a double use and be put to service in students' own compositions.

Once the idea of a 'binding note' (a note in common) has been established, you can investigate keys that are a 3rd apart. Return to the 'Beethoven theme' and see what tertiary modulations students can come up with from its original C major. Encourage them to think enharmonically: this is of course setting them up to spot how Brahms pulls off a daring modulation from E flat to B major in the recapitulation section at bar 212.

It's also worth pointing out to students that the four movements of the symphony as a whole relate to each other in a tertiary way: C – E – A flat – C.

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## Functional harmony in Brahms's First Symphony

Of course, tertiary relationships are not the only thing that governs Brahms's choice of keys and chords. Brahms's harmony is predominantly functional, albeit with the inclusion of some rich chromaticism.

What do we really mean by functional harmony? Essentially, it boils down to dominant-tonic relationships – or dominant-tonic polarity, if you want to sound fancy. Within a tonal system, the quickest way to establish a key is to hear chord I and chord V in close proximity to each other: this gives us enough of the most important notes within a key for our ears and brains to latch on to the tonality. The perfect cadence – especially when reinforced with a dominant 7th – is the strongest, most directionful progression there is. You can stick a series of these '5th apart' relationships together and make a vi-ii-V-I run-up to a cadence, or travel quickly through harmonic space using a cycle of 5ths. Wherever these 5th-dominated relationships show up, that is functionality in action. Surprisingly often, tonic and dominant notes are also used as pedals.

Essentially what we need to be looking for is any chord relationship where the roots are a 5th apart. This may be a perfect cadence in an already established key at the end of a phrase or section, but it could equally be a method for establishing a sense of tonality, whether in passing or as a fully fledged modulation.

Even after a full year of A level study, students are likely to need practice at identifying chords, especially in an orchestral score with transposing instruments. This is something that can be practised as a starter activity to every lesson, perhaps in conjunction with aural recognition of intervals and cadences.

To start off with, choose diatonic examples that are not obfuscated by the presence of non-harmonic notes. Warn your students not to get distracted by transposing instruments: start off with the strings and work out what notes are present in the chord. Then rearrange these into a traffic-light formation so that all the notes are either in a space or on a line, in whichever clef is their favourite. This reveals the root note, which can then be compared to the lowest note of the chord in the music to see if the chord is inverted. The traffic-light arrangement will also reveal whether there are any additional notes, such as 7ths or 9ths.

In a straightforward diatonic example, it should now be fairly easy to check any other non-transposing parts for any additional pitches, and then assign a Roman numeral chord label to the chord. All this may take students more time than you anticipate, and they may also find chord identification strenuous. It's a great example of a musical skill that takes practice: there are no short cuts.

### Chromatic harmony in Brahms's First Symphony

Chromatic harmony can be a daunting topic for an A level student. However, the good news is that there is only a limited number of different chromatic chords that students need to understand.

First of all, students need to be on the lookout for any accidentals in the music. Understanding the significance of these is often a good indicator of the depth of a student's understanding. The very surface level of understanding is to be able to spot, for example, that there is an F sharp in a piece of music in C major. Deeper understanding will be able to provide reasons for it being there. Is it a chromatic passing note? Is it part of a secondary dominant chord? Or is it part of a modulation to the dominant?

If there is a modulation, the accidental in question is likely to be one of at least a few matching accidentals. Where the harmony is broadly functional, as in Brahms's First Symphony, it's also likely that there will be some tonic and dominant chords to help establish the key. However, if this is not the case, then the presence of the accidental may point to something more transient or to a chromatic chord.

In the final movement of Brahms's First Symphony, there are some excellent examples of chromatic chords. At 12' there is a Neapolitan 6 chord: a first inversion of the flat supertonic, or Db/F. This appears to want to resolve in the conventional way, being followed by a dominant which seems to be about to be followed in turn by a tonic chord. However, Brahms slips in a cheeky A flat chord in the place of the tonic at 13', giving the progression an interrupted flavour. There are more N6 chords in the passage from bar 249.

The second type of chromatic chord to understand is the secondary dominant. If the significance of dominant-tonic relationships is understood, an extension of that concept is to utilise the true dominant of any diatonic chord to create a strong but colourful progression. We see an example of this in the second part of the introduction, where a B flat is added to the chord at 34', creating a C7 chord. The fact that this is followed by an F major chord (actually F7) is what makes sense of the presence of the B flat, and makes the C7 chord V7 of IV.

We see another example of a secondary dominant at bar 47. We are in the key of F, and at this point are confronted with an A major chord. Again, sense is made of this unexpected C sharp by being followed with a D minor chord: vi of F major. So, the A to Dm progression is another dominant-tonic progression, labelled as a secondary dominant: V of vi followed by vi.

### Analysing the score: tertiary relationships, functional harmony and chromaticism

How you proceed from this point depends on the level of understanding of your students. You will know how much of the movement at a time they will be able to tackle in a semi-autonomous fashion, now that they understand what they are looking out for. The cerebral and intricate nature of Brahms's composing style will almost certainly mean that a wholly student-led approach to analysis is going to be impossible for all but the most extraordinarily able students. Some passages are likely to need a teacher-led explanation, particularly where there is any ambiguity of tonality or harmony. You will need to decide how to chunk up the movement, and what level of scaffolding will be required.

One good way of scaffolding this activity, at least to start off with, is to decide on a short chunk of music and create a list of features to look for in treasure-hunt fashion. If your group is big enough, you could even set them up to find different things, or perhaps take on different sections and then explain their findings to the wider group. As with the thematic exploration, all of this is likely to take some time. However, students will be engaging with the music in a much more active way than if their teacher simply gives them a bar-by-bar breakdown.



## Revision activities

There is a lot more to effective revision than simply doing past papers. If a past paper is akin to a rugby match, we need to find the academic equivalent of practice drills. Rugby players do not train by simply playing matches – they practise specific and isolated skills. We need to find activities for our A level musicians to do that fulfil the same function.

If a question asks about harmony and tonality – or any other element – a list of ideas and terminology needs to come to mind straight away: it's worth rehearsing this as part of the revision process. An ideal lesson-starter or finisher would be to give a couple of minutes with a timer to write down all the terms that spring to mind for a particular element. Depending on the personality of your class, there could be a competitive element to this, with points and a leaderboard. Alternatively, for a slightly sillier approach, you could try 'snowballs', where after a suitably short time, students screw up their paper, throw it across the room to someone else, unscrew what they have received and add to it.

The extension of this would be to name specific features of the Brahms movement that fit with each element. This could be done in any format: a grid, a list, a mind-map. Students could then use these as the basis for writing questions for each other to complete. These could include multiple-choice or short-answer questions. Having to write a mark scheme, and using this to mark other students' work, will engage the higher-order thinking that will help effective and deep learning. This strategy also has the advantage of being much harder work for the students than it is for the teacher, which is surely the right way round.

Students need to become thoroughly acquainted with this rather meaty movement. Another quick-fire, no-prep activity you could try is to play the music from a randomly chosen point, and ask students to find the point in their scores. An advanced version of this would involve no scores, but with students aurally identifying the section of the movement.

Rather than starting with the audio, you could try a musical version of blank-page retrieval using a photocopied section of the score. Taking out the bar numbers would add to the challenge of identifying the section. Students can then annotate the score as best they can using their elements and themes colours. Keep the sections and time limit short: more able students can do more sections. You could even apply the snowball idea to a score, and have a selection of score excerpts around the room. Students can annotate as much as they can, and after a set time move on to the next excerpt and see what they can add.